







# Priestess of the Occult







# Priestess of the Occult

{ *Madame Blavatsky* }

BY

GERTRUDE MARVIN WILLIAMS



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I	ENTER MADAME	Page 3
Chapter II	DANSE MACABRE	15
Chapter III	THE VAGABOND YEARS	26
Chapter IV	VARIORUM EDITION	34
Chapter V	LAND OF OPPORTUNITY	56
Chapter VI	TRIAL AND ERROR	75
Chapter VII	CREATING A CULT	94
Chapter VIII	NECROMANCY, INC.	117
Chapter IX	WEST GOES EAST	135
Chapter X	ENTER THE MAHATMAS	154
Chapter XI	WHAT IS TRUTH?	174
Chapter XII	HOODOO YEARS	183
Chapter XIII	THE WORLD IN HER SLING	201
Chapter XIV	THE COULOMB LETTERS	222
Chapter XV	THE SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH	237
Chapter XVI	BLOODY BUT UNBOWED	258
Chapter XVII	HELENA UNVEILED	274
Chapter XVIII	SECRET DOCTRINE	287

## *TABLE OF CONTENTS*

Chapter XIX	INTO THE SILENCE	Page 311
	CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE	316
	APPENDIXES	318
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	339
	INDEX	follows page 345

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

THE INSCRUTABLE MADAME	Facing page	20
THE "LOVELY MAIDEN"		21
SKETCH OF H.P.B. BY A. L. RAWSON		21
ALBERT P. SINNETT		52
COUNT SERGEI YULIEVICH WITTE		52
COLONEL HENRY STEEL OLCOTT		53
ALEXANDER NIKOLAYEVICH AKSAKOV		84
SALON IN THE LAMASERY, NEW YORK		85
DINING ROOM IN THE LAMASERY, NEW YORK		116
A MAHATMA AT HOME		117
INSCRIPTION AND SIGNATURE BY MAD- AME BLAVATSKY		178
MESSAGE AND SIGNATURE BY MAHATMA MORYA		178
HEADQUARTERS OF THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY AT ADYAR		210
PORTRAIT OF MADAME BLAVATSKY BY SCHMIECHEN		211



*LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS*

LEADING THEOSOPHISTS AFTER MADAME BLAVATSKY'S DEATH	242
COUNTESS CONSTANCE WACHTMEISTER	243
FLOOR PLANS OF SECRET ROOM AND SHRINE, ADYAR	244
THEOSOPHISTS WHO KNEW H.P.B. IN HER LATER YEARS	304
ANNIE BESANT	305
HER FIGHTING DAYS WERE OVER	336
H.P.B. IN PERAMBULATOR	337

# Priestess of the Occult





## CHAPTER I



### ENTER MADAME

(1874)

*“PERMETTEZ-MOI, Madame,”* and the Colonel gallantly lighted the lady’s cigarette. In his diary that night, under the date line for October 14, 1874, he made note of meeting the Countess Helena Petrovna de Blavatsky. Her scarlet Garibaldi shirt had challenged him the moment he entered the somber dining room of the Vermont farmhouse. Her smoking was a madcap gesture that roused his curiosity. Uncertainly he decided that she was just another eccentric; the gaunt New England homestead was full of cranks gathered from far and near to attend the séances held by two dour farmers, the Eddy brothers. Luckily he knew enough French to understand Madame’s amusing chatter with a woman companion, and he sat down at the same table. She had, he confided to his diary, a massive Calmuck face, and her hair was a thick blond mop that stood out from her head “silken soft and crinkled to the roots like the fleece of a Cotswold ewe.” It was not a poetic simile, but he was not a romantic man. Colonel Olcott was middle-aged, married, the father of three sons; beginning life as a farmer, he had made himself a lawyer, and was doubling as a newspaper reporter.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

After dinner everyone strolled out into an unkempt yard. Vivacious Madame Blavatsky rolled a cigarette with practiced ease and, as she passed the Colonel, did a swift pantomime of looking for a light. The Colonel learned from Madame that she was a Russian lately arrived in this country and an ardent spiritualist. She had been following the accounts of these séances in the *New York Graphic* with breathless interest; they were written by a Colonel Olcott and were creating a sensation. The public swept them off the newsstands as fast as they were printed and she had paid as much as a dollar a copy for this three-cent paper. She chattered on confidently:

"I hesitated before coming here because I was afraid of meeting that Colonel Olcott."

"Why should you be afraid of him, Madame?"

"Oh! because I fear that he might write about me in his paper."

It gave the Colonel the pleasant sense of a strong man protecting a helpless woman to introduce himself as none other than the dreaded Olcott, and he enjoyed her charming confusion. Madame prolonged her visit for a fortnight, the Colonel made an early surrender. She bewildered and fascinated him with an exotic display of temperament, reeling off tales of amazing adventure, flashing into rages when she swore like a trooper, suddenly transfigured by flights of sublime fantasy.

Madame's arrival had transformed the séances. Previously an Indian spirit control, Santum or Honto or the squaw Bright Star, had taken possession of the entranced medium's body and called out routine messages supposed to come from deceased relatives of persons in the audience: Mother, Uncle John, Cousin Mary. Madame changed all that. Fantastic figures swarmed over the rocky hillside as though it were a diplomatic garden party: a Kurd warrior armed to the teeth, a black African in a breechclout, a turbaned Hindu. Madame recognized the new spirits one after

## ENTER MADAME

another: Hassan Agha, a wealthy merchant versed in the black arts whom she had known in Tiflis; Michalko, a Georgian serf who had been her bodyguard in the Caucasus; an old Russian peasant nurse who greeted her respectfully as "Barishnia"; several dignified Russian gentlemen wearing the Cross of Saint Anne, all of whom turned out to be relatives.

Madame Blavatsky seemed to have come to an immediate understanding with the surly Eddy brothers. Whereas the audience, including the newspaper men, was relegated to the back of the room, Madame sat on the top step of the medium's platform close to the cabinet, where she could touch the hands of the spirits as they wavered between this world and the next. It was she too who played the parlor organ for singing and made herself generally useful. Manifestations reached a climax on the last night of her stay. In the darkness a spirit control placed in Madame Blavatsky's hand the buckle of a medal awarded to her brave father by Czar Nicholas and buried with him in Russia the previous year. Madame gave a choked cry and, even after the lamp was brought in, was unable to speak. When she recovered herself, she identified the buckle by its blunt pointed pin, which she had broken off many years earlier.

With guileless enthusiasm Olcott reported the new phenomena. He called attention to the amazing accuracy of the spirits' costumes, taking Madame's word for it, since he could scarcely have known the correct details for Kurd warriors and Ukrainian peasants. He had no difficulty in breaking down her shyness about publicity and he let himself go in describing her aristocratic family connections, her adventures by land and sea, and her "rare educational and natural endowments . . . It will be seen that a lady of such social position would be incapable of entering into a vulgar conspiracy with any private tricksters to deceive the public."<sup>1</sup> Madame's understanding with the Eddys had been observed

<sup>1</sup> *New York Graphic*, November 27, 1874.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

and challenged; the Colonel in the first fortnight of their acquaintance was forced to fumble defensively with the charges of fraud that pursued them for the rest of their lives.

Madame virtually kidnapped the Colonel. She needed a partner, and he had excellent qualifications. A newspaper man, he could secure publicity; he was credulous and susceptible; his dignified and honest presence would be disarming. Such was the beginning of a partnership that assisted Madame Blavatsky to attain immortality as the creator of a semireligious cult.

Every year on May 8 devotees all over the world assemble to celebrate White Lotus Day, the anniversary of the death in 1891 of Madame Blavatsky, founder of Theosophy. They write eulogies and read favorite passages from the works of H.P.B., as she signed herself, and as they lovingly remember her. Half a century after her death she is still a vivid, living force in the hearts of thousands of earnest men and women.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was a brilliant and extraordinarily captivating woman. Never a siren, she depended on something more subtle and more important than beauty. She displayed, rather, the exaggerated qualities, the ingrained nonconformity, the histrionic gestures of a hero-sized statue come to life. She had homely square cut features and had begun to put on flesh before she was thirty, but she had also a rollicking, impudent, irresistibly endearing sense of humor, and she ridiculed all the world, including herself with Rabelaisian gusto. She possessed imagination, versatility, dynamic energy. And she looked you in the face with magnificent azure eyes reflecting the wisdom of one who has lived lavishly and intensely and known the excesses of joy and anguish. Men remembered her eyes all their lives.

Intuitive, impulsive, inconsistent, swept by pathological rages, Helena was by nature an artist, but she preferred another part, that of philosopher and teacher, and she played it in the grand manner. She was subject to the emotional

## ENTER MADAME

instability and neurotic tendencies characteristic of many mystics, the famous saints and founders of religious cults. A bundle of contradictions, she combined a showman's instinct for popular appeal with the contemptuous arrogance of an old-school aristocrat. She was a fascinating human being. She challenged the interest and commanded the loyalty of intellectuals, men and women of distinction and important achievements rendered vulnerable by a passionate craving for an answer to the riddle of life. Endowed with mysterious power to dominate her disciples, she drove them to despair and revolt, but while they remained under her spell she had the gift of rousing them to exhilarating heights of self-abnegation and dynamic loyalty.

The story of Helena's life cuts across subjects that have from time immemorial teased and seduced mankind: magic, mysticism, spiritualism, yoga, psychological phenomena. Her life exudes a musky odor of mystery and paradox. In her last years she was haunted by old scandals, shadows of lovers dead and gone, bigamous marriages, an illegitimate son, fraud and trickery *de luxe*. She owed her most successful effects to the magic not of the occult, but of her own captivating personality. But Madame Blavatsky created something more enduring than personal glamour. She left a body of legends and writings that bring comfort to men and women all over the world struggling against loneliness and infirmity, against those unhappy fears which keep mankind forever searching for reassurance and security. In spite of flagrant perfidies, she has passed the ultimate test and won her niche among the elect whose memory survives the grave.

### 2.

Madame Blavatsky's life divided itself into three periods: *childhood* in a world that has vanished with the glittering pomp and brutality of old czarist Russia, ending with her marriage at seventeen to General Nicephore Blavatsky; *the prime of life*, a quarter-century of vagabondage, bold ad-



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

ventures rebelling against conventions, crashing tabus; and *maturity*, readjusting herself to the harsh reality of middle age. At forty-two Madame Blavatsky became High Priestess of the Occult.

Madame's Theosophical career offers an intimate picture of the strange, secret process of creating a cult. She left a mass of confidential writings that show with the vividness of a biological moving picture the process of breathing life into the dry dust of a new evangel, the creation of an atmosphere of authenticity, the manufacture of legends and evidence, the casual enunciation of a new theory, and its evolution into a sacred principle venerated by the faithful.

Schools of theosophy have flourished in many countries all down the centuries, and are distinguished by their recurring claim to a special divine revelation, the word *theosophy* meaning literally wisdom of the divine. The famous theosophists have used various devices to authenticate their revelations: Paracelsus, an occultist, dabbled in alchemy and studied the kabbala; Swedenborg beheld heavenly visions; Jakob Böhme withdrew into long hours of contemplation, achieving inner illumination. The illusion of being set apart as a special agent of divinity frequently degenerates into paranoiac delusions of grandeur. When a person has the mental stability to keep the conviction of divine favor under control and exceptional magnetism or capacity for leadership, the chances are good that a new cult will be born.

While Madame Blavatsky was creating the Theosophical Society in New York City during the autumn of 1874, not far away in Lynn, Massachusetts, Mary Baker Eddy was also laboring to bring forth a cult. The first edition of *Science and Health* was published in 1875. Although the two cults were virtually twins, resemblance stops there. Theosophy lacked the popular appeal of Christian Science, with its practical guides to health, wealth, and happiness. Madame Blavatsky was fascinated by occultism and addressed herself to the more limited group preoccupied with mys-

## *ENTER MADAME*

tery, premonitions, telepathy, and supernormal phenomena. Ultimately she added a very popular provision. Whereas most religions depend for comfort on promises of happiness in another world, she offered spiritual first aid. In India she adapted the Hindu doctrines of Reincarnation through many lives, and Karma, the theory of compensation by which we shall be rewarded or punished in our next incarnation as we do well or ill in this life.

The idea of being singled out for divine revelations strongly appealed to H.P.B. It healed certain early wounds to her pride. But she could not have conventional Christian visions because her rebellion had been especially violent against the church. The Swedenborgian heaven peopled with hundreds of thousands of angels was not for her. Nor could she continue to support the cult for which she had lately been willing to "sell her soul." Suddenly she turned, denied that she had ever really accepted spiritualism, and attacked its fraudulent and demoralizing practices. Her bridges burned, she was free to create her own indigenous hierarchy. After two false starts she evolved the Mahatmas or Masters, a mysterious Brotherhood modelled on the monastic orders of Buddhism and Christianity, but isolated in the most inaccessible portion of the earth's surface, the interior of Tibet. As elder brothers of mankind, "old souls," they had completed their round of incarnations upon this earth, but they returned in ghostly presence to give advice to those worthy to receive it: the Theosophists. H.P.B. claimed that she had undergone several years of rigorous training in Tibet and had been appointed sole intermediary between the Mahatmas and mankind.

Madame established a regimen for her probationers and chelas (students) based on the ascetic practices of Indian yogis: no meat, no liquor, no smoking, chastity, and the use of meditation as a means of personal discipline. Chelas who followed this austere program might hope to achieve supernatural powers and privileged relations with the Mahatmas

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

in this life. It is a clever concept. It is difficult really to interest people in a world beyond the Unknown. Death drops a curtain. Madame Blavatsky promised to by-pass death, and to admit her chelas to a secret cosmos that lay all about them, invisible and inaccessible except to the initiate. By becoming sole intermediary between them and this secret universe, she wielded extraordinary power. All hope of progress for the chela depended on keeping in her good graces. She also reserved a way out for emergencies. Because no human chela could hope to fulfil completely the ascetic requirements, any failure to achieve the anticipated supernatural rewards could be blamed on his own shortcomings. Ingeniously H.P.B. had streamlined the mystical yearnings of the immemorial East to a western schedule of immediate and tangible rewards. In its field, Theosophy had everything.

In order to convince a sceptical world of the reality of her Mahatmas, Madame dipped freely into the occultism-magic school of theosophy, promoting spectacular miracles during her residence in India. They aroused world-wide curiosity and brought down upon her in 1884 an investigation by the Society for Psychical Research, an organization of English intellectuals predisposed in favor of supernormal phenomena, but insisting on the use of honest methods. Its book-length report pronounced Madame "one of the most accomplished, ingenious and interesting impostors in history." During the seven final years of her life, Madame Blavatsky reached the summit of her power and influence. Barnum made a world reputation on the thesis that people like to be fooled. Perhaps being called an ingenious impostor helped rather than hindered Madame. Her disciples carried her back to London and installed her in a mansion. London society was curious to see her, and the moody lioness became the rage. F. Marion Crawford put her into his most popular novel, *Mr. Isaacs*, and made one of her Mahatmas the hero. Peers and belted earls and their ladies, scientists, savants,

## ENTER MADAME

and explorers thronged her drawing room. Even the Church of England, thundering against her on Sunday, peeked at her on Monday. Leaning back against the cushions at one of her soirees, Madame watched the wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury sitting primly on a front row chair and watching her.

An impressive list of people subscribed to Theosophy under the glamour of H.P.B. Exclusive of that lunatic fringe which hovers about all cults, she reached an audience several cuts mentally above the average church congregation. The obscurity of her doctrinal writings discouraged idle curiosity and tended to eliminate the sluggards. The extravagance of her claims involved her disciples in exhausting controversies. They wrote treatises, tributes, sardonic confessions of disillusionment, called names, sued for libel, went crazy, committed suicide, and left behind them a dizzy stack of literature agitating the perennial question: Was She a Charlatan?

Modern generations removed from the magic of Madame Blavatsky's presence and the hypnotic power in the depths of her azure eyes may appraise her impersonally. Her supernatural claims seem fantastic, her trickery seems obvious. Such an estimate misses the point: Madame's greatness, which makes her a vital force to a limited public even today, lay in her power of suggestion. After hurling defiance in the teeth of the polite world, she whirled around and forced it to take her seriously. She compelled susceptible intellectuals to believe in her and try to do what she wished. She had uncanny power over people.

Such eminent scientists as Alfred Russel Wallace, Sir William Crookes, and Thomas A. Edison became members of her Theosophical Society. William Ewart Gladstone bestowed upon Madame and her pupil Annie Besant the accolade of a critical article in *The Nineteenth Century and After*. When Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Poet Laureate of England, died, a copy of Madame's mystical poem, *The Voice of*

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

*the Silence*, lay on the table beside his bed. Many distinguished literary men paid her extravagant tribute. J. D. Beresford, the novelist, not himself a Theosophist, found no difficulty in accepting her claim to supernormal powers and considered that "in the recorded history of the past 6,000 years or so there has been no woman so deserving of our interest as Madame Blavatsky."

Ironically enough, by 1920 Madame Blavatsky's name had temporarily disappeared from the Theosophists' magazines, her books from their counters. Neophytes were referred to the writings of her successor, the prolific Annie Besant (372 titles in her 1924 bibliography) and the only slightly less prolific Leadbeater. Mrs. Besant inherited a position giving her autocratic power by virtue of Madame Blavatsky's pet devices, vows of secrecy and blind obedience required of all members admitted to the inner councils. Almost the first use made of this dictatorial power was an attempt to banish the memory of H.P.B. and set up strange gods, but the dead Blavatsky had more vitality than her living successors. Mrs. Besant's official endorsement of her astral Svengali, Mr. Leadbeater, and his perverse policies resulted in a succession of scandals and a startling turnover in membership, almost complete in some years.

Between 1921 and 1929 the parent Theosophical Society at Adyar enrolled 50,000 new members, but the 1929 total of 43,000 showed a net gain over 1921 of only 3,000. It had taken in 50,000 new members, but had lost virtually all of its old followers. Indignant Theosophists, unwilling to condone violations of their codes of honor and decency under pretext of occult sanctions, resigned wholesale. Entire national sections seceded. A dozen competing organizations came into the field. The total membership of the various sects, including the disillusioned who resign in protest against current policies but remain Theosophists at heart, reading the literature and cherishing Madame's memory, must run well over 100,000, and may be several times that

## *ENTER MADAME*

number. The readers of Theosophical literature provide a market for a nice little publishing business, judging by the numerous fifty- and seventy-five-page catalogs of Theosophical books issued, with H.P.B.'s classics selling at from seven to ten dollars each. Over-all figures are not available because some Societies hold all information secret.

Rebellion against the Besant-Leadbeater heresies came to a head in the early 1920's with the creation of a Back-to-Blavatsky movement devoted to reviving her influence and encouraging reprints of her books, then out of print. Distressed Theosophists flocked to the new movement, which they hoped would slough off the abuses of Neo-Theosophy and bring back the influence and teachings of H.P.B. They organized an independent association, published their own magazines and pamphlets and issued a seven-point program (seven is a mystic number). They would organize a working center in London; hold meetings and classes to study the teachings of H.P.B.; gather information from literary and scientific sources in her support; form a lending library of her books and sympathetic commentaries; publish new editions of her works, using original texts (which they considered to have been mutilated and altered by Annie Besant); promote correspondence with inquirers all over the world, and elucidate and seek the realization of H.P.B.'s ideals. An important activity not included in this list was that of following up current articles on H.P.B. and, in case of unfavorable comment, securing retractions and apologies. They at once became involved with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was attacking Madame in his books and magazine articles and stoutly refused to budge from his position.

The Back-to-Blavatsky Movement received fresh impetus in 1938 with the organization of the Society of the Friends of Madame Blavatsky, under the aggressive leadership of an Englishwoman, Mrs. Beatrice Hastings. Within three months of its organization the Society had enrolled members in fifteen countries. Its avowed purpose is to secure the

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

withdrawal of the Report of the Society for Psychical Research, which branded Madame an impostor. The Society has published a series of concise, well-written pamphlets—by Mrs. Hastings—dealing with a few of the many controversial episodes in Madame's life and furnishing adroit answers to criticisms by infidels. It is also alert to attack the good faith and reputation of writers and speakers who presume to criticize Madame Blavatsky adversely.

Any effort to discover the truth about Madame Blavatsky must surmount the difficulty of her having tampered with much of her source material. A standard biographical sketch by A. P. Sinnett<sup>2</sup> quotes at length from memoirs by Madame's sister and aunt; these were actually written under Madame's supervision and in large part at her dictation *after* she founded the Theosophical Society, and were therefore slanted to support her claims of supernatural relationships and powers. After the death of H.P.B. her sister Vera publicly apologized for lending herself to such deception. (See Appendix A, page 318.)

While Madame's hypnotic influence demagnetized a broad area, leaving few authentic sources, it did not destroy the interest of these stories of her own invention, but actually added to it. Her turning biographical data into a phantasmagoria makes them more intimately revealing of her inner self than a sober account of what actually happened. It was one of her strange whims to give herself an artlessly sinister background. She passed her entire young life through a bath of abnormality and decadence. Her need to pretend these morbid incidents is far more revealing of Helena Blavatsky and her pathological trends than the conventional story of a spoiled daughter of the Russian aristocracy.

<sup>2</sup> A. P. Sinnett: *Incidents in the Life of Madame Blavatsky*. (Hereafter referred to in the notes as Sinnett: *Incidents*.)

## CHAPTER II



### *DANSE MACABRE*

(1831—1848)

BOGUS COUNTS and Princes have found happy hunting grounds in the United States; we scarcely expect smooth-talking foreigners to prove their titles. Madame Blavatsky was not a Countess, and in due time she prudently disclaimed the *de* Blavatsky and the coroneted calling card with which she had dazzled Colonel Olcott. She was well born, however: her maternal ancestors traced their lineage back to a ninth-century Grand Duke Boris, one of the three Princes of Rus, pillars of the Russian aristocracy, founders of the Russian Empire. Madame's mother, Helene Fadeev, was a daughter of the Princess Helene Dolgoruki and Andrez Mikhailovich Fadeev, Privy Councillor of the Caucasus. Madame's mother was only sixteen when she married a Russian captain of horse artillery, Peter Hahn, whose family came originally from the petty nobility of Mecklenburg. Soon after the wedding, the young Captain received orders to join his regiment for service in the notably ruthless campaign to put down the Polish insurrection of 1831.

The girl wife returned to her parents in Ekaterinoslav in the heart of the Ukraine, and it was there that Helena was born on the night of August 12, 1831 (July 30, on the Rus-



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

sian calendar). Local lore credited this one night in the year with conferring magical powers upon its progeny, ability to control the *domovoi*s (goblins) and witches that infested the countryside.

In addition to the blood and terror of the Polish campaign, the year 1831 had many other sinister associations. It witnessed the beginning of a plague of cholera that, sweeping through Europe, almost exterminated entire cities. It was a year of terror, death, coffins, lamentation, and mourning. From the moment of Helena's birth, malevolent circumstances attended little "Lolo," her mother's pet name for her. She was born prematurely, and a hurried baptism was arranged. The priest in lace-trimmed vestments and his long-haired acolytes in golden robes assembled in the center of the stately drawing room. Scores of relatives and a retinue of serfs, holding lighted tapers according to the Greek Orthodox rite, crowded about the priest, the three pairs of godparents, and the puny baby. Lolo's three-year-old aunt stood in the front row of sponsors as proxy for a relative. The ceremony droned on for nearly an hour, and the child aunt, overcome by drowsiness, quietly settled herself on the floor for a nap, letting the taper fall from her hand. Instantly the priest's lace-bordered vestment caught fire and panic swept the room. Several people were burned and scarred, the old priest quite severely.

Behind the façade of Helena's stories of an unhappy childhood looms an implacable and overpowering background that may well have given direction to the fantasies of an impressionable child. Her neurotic tendencies were doubtless exaggerated by the effect on an unstable nature of war and pestilence in the Russia of the 1830's. Nature provided a background of brooding terror, the wail of winter winds, the dead weight of snow and ice crowding down on puny man, shutting him in upon himself, threatening to maim or kill him if he relaxed his vigilance. Helena received her indelible first impressions of life from superstitious peasant nurses

## DANSE MACABRE

who put their trust in primitive rites and black magic. Her own relatives were subject to the same delusions, for the highest in the land surrendered to the dark seductions of witchcraft and sorcery. Even half a century later, the heads of the state and the royal family were terrorized pawns in the clutch of a degenerate, maniacal peasant, Rasputin, who conducted his diablerie in the name of religion and under the protection of the State Church.

At the close of the Polish campaign, Madame Hahn and Lolo rejoined the Captain at the station in southern Russia where he was leading raids against the mountain tribes of the Caucasus. The brutal background of these army camps must also have had its effect upon the child. Captain Hahn had been educated as a member of the Imperial Cadet Corps, limited to the sons of the nobility but maintaining standards of discipline that, as described by Prince Kropotkin, also a member of the Corps, seem barbarously severe. A cadet caught smoking might receive a thousand blows with a birch rod before the assembled Corps, a doctor standing by to intervene when the boy's pulse was about to stop beating. The Corps director was replaced as a mollicoddle if he did not have a few such cases every year.

Intolerant of the liberal policies of the late Czar Alexander I, his brother, Czar Nicholas demanded of his army ever greater severity and more repressive methods in his determination to build an invincible military machine. Conditions among the muzhiks, the peasant soldiery, can scarcely be imagined. Serfs called for military duty were guarded to prevent their committing suicide. Officers punished the most trivial faults with kicks and floggings. If a soldier died under punishment, the specified number of blows was completed upon his corpse.<sup>1</sup>

Garrison life was no place for weaklings. It was rough fare for the daughter of a Princess. Helena's mother, young Madame Hahn, found escape in a literary career. Under the

<sup>1</sup> Prince P. Kropotkin: *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, p. 55.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

pen name Zenaida R-, she wrote a dozen successful novels during the next decade and, using her work as an excuse, made long visits to Saint Petersburg, where she was well known in literary circles. The critic Belinsky extolled her as the George Sand of Russia; another noted critic, Senkovsky (known as Baron Brambens), was her intimate friend. Protesting against the boredom and vulgarity of army life, Zenaida's stories sketched a world where the men were cads and cowards, women invariably the victims, sometimes of man's lust, sometimes of the cruelty of provincial gossip. The stories reflected a pitiful disillusionment.

Although Madame Blavatsky later made abundant use of her distinguished relatives for publicity, she built a wall of silence around her famous mother. Madame Hahn was only twenty-eight when she died; in her brief life she had borne two daughters and a son and written a dozen novels. She lived until her Lolo was twelve years old, but Helena tried to obscure this fact with the statement: "Mother died when I was a baby."<sup>2</sup> Predating her mother's death by ten years was an easy way to avoid discussing her. But why?

Helena grew from a sickly babe into a problem child, rebellious, subject to hysteria and convulsions. On her death bed Madame Hahn said sadly, "Ah well, perhaps it is best that I am dying, so at least I shall be spared seeing what befalls Helena. Of one thing I am certain, her life will not be as that of other women, and she will have much to suffer."<sup>3</sup>

This unhappy fragment is the sole memorial of a twelve-year relationship between a gifted woman and her daughter. It suggests friction and a sharp conflict of wills. Helena resented her mother's long absences, her intimate friendships in the bohemian world of letters, as a desertion of her home and of Helena herself. The child's conservative pride was affronted by Zenaida's failure to be commonplace like other mothers. Madame Blavatsky's prolific memories of

<sup>2</sup> *Letters of H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett*, p. 150. (Hereafter referred to in the notes as *Letters H.P.B.*)

<sup>3</sup> *Lucifer*, November 1894.

## DANSE MACABRE

her youth ran back to her fourth year; she excluded her mother from them because her mother had hurt her pride. She was concealing quarrels and scenes that had left scars she wanted to forget.

From infancy Helena was described as showing symptoms of a neurotic disposition, walking and talking in her sleep at the age of four, displaying morbid tendencies, loving the weird and fantastic. For days at a time she would refuse to play with the other children and stand whispering to herself; if her governess tried to divert her from this "profane gibberish" she would fly into a tantrum. Her earliest memory was appropriately macabre. The country side at Ekaterinoslav was haunted by *russalkas*, green-haired nymphs living in willow trees along the river banks. When her nurses crossed her imperious young will, Helena used to threaten to have the *russalkas* tickle them to death. As a child of four she was walking with her nurse beside the river when the fourteen-year-old serf who followed them, pulling her perambulator, annoyed her. Imitating her father's roars at an offending muzhik, she turned on the boy and screamed, "I will have you tickled to death by a *russalka*. There's one coming down from that tree. . . . Here she comes. . . . See! See!!" The boy took to his heels over the river bank and was never again seen alive. When fishermen recovered his body weeks later, her family assumed that the lad had accidentally stepped into a sand-pit whirlpool. But the household serfs knew better. They knew that four-year-old Helena had withdrawn her protection from the boy and delivered him up to the vicious *russalkas*.<sup>4</sup> It is significant that Madame should want to accuse herself of homicide at the age of four, and that she should choose for her victim a boy ten years her senior.

Helena's only happy childhood memories were of the years between six and twelve spent in her father's army camps. Petted and spoiled as the *enfant du régiment*, she

<sup>4</sup> Sinnett: *Incidents*, p. 16.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

tyrannized over her father's orderlies, whom she vastly preferred to female nurses and governesses. She loved her front-row seat in a man's world, waited on by a troop of artillery, riding horseback like a little Cossack, galloping across the Siberian steppes to visit primitive villages and pick up a smattering about shamans and magic that she put to good use in later life.

On his wife's death the Captain, forced to plan for the future of his daughters, realized that army camps were most unsuitable for little girls. This time Helena protested in vain; her father escorted the two children back to their grandparents for the difficult years of their adolescence. Looking back, Helena was almost as reticent about her father as about her mother. Her only childhood story about him was of a tempestuous scene in Bath. She was fourteen, and the Captain had taken her for a tour of Europe and England, but the only memory she had preserved was of going to bed with hysterics because he refused to permit her to ride astride, Cossack fashion, down the crescents and terraces of the fashionable watering-place.

Helena's grandfather, Andrew Fadeev, had been appointed Civil Governor of Saratov, a semi-Asiatic city on the Volga, lying two hundred miles north of the present Stalingrad, where, a century later, Helena's countrymen turned the tide of German invasion. The Governor's palace was a rambling eighteenth-century castle, honeycombed with underground passages. For Helena these dungeons were haunted by the ghosts of serfs who had been beaten to death or had starved and rotted in their chains. Despite gruesome stories of a young girl tortured to death in the 1700's for refusing to accept the advances of her aged master, Helena was fascinated by these catacombs and in order to escape from her lessons, built herself a crypt, barricaded with old chairs and tables where she hid and read a book of magic, *Solomon's Wisdom*. When the governess complained



*The inscrutable Madame looks deep into your eyes*



*Helena Hahn before her marriage, gruff old Mahatma Morya called this the "lovely maiden" picture*



*A sketch of H.P.B. by her Cairo admirer, A. L. Rawson, made twenty-five years later in New York*

## DANSE MACABRE

of her absences, her grandfather sent powerful serfs in charge of a gendarme to bring her upstairs by force. If she was missing from her bed at night, her elders knew they would find her pacing these dark and musty tunnels in her sleep.

The fortunate circumstance of an independent account of the Fadeev household supplements our picture of Helena's girlhood and adds perspective to the two-dimensional melodrama of her stories. Her grandmother, Madame Fadeev, *née* the Princess Dolgoruki was a *grande dame* of the old school. She supervised the succession of governesses who attempted to teach Helena; a little later, Helena's cousin, Count Sergei Yulievich Witte, learned his letters at her knee. The Count in his memoirs drew an admiring and tender picture of his grandmother.<sup>5</sup> He remembered the old Princess being wheeled down the palace corridor to his schoolroom and his kneeling beside her, holding up his primer so that she might look on. In spite of years of isolation at remote provincial outposts with her husband, the Governor General, Helena's grandmother was a remarkably versatile woman. She spoke five languages, painted, knew a good deal about science for her day, was beloved for her humanity and generosity. She corresponded with distinguished men in many fields; an English geologist named a fossil shell for her, the *Venus Fadeef*! She could have been an inspiring influence, but Helena, full of her own precocity, had no more to say about her than about her parents.

Madame Fadeev's hobby was botany. On those remote Russian steppes she devoted an entire wing of her palace to an important collection of Caucasian flora. They were neatly labelled with Latin names and scientific descriptions in a day when interest in natural history and the building of museums were almost unknown. Count Witte remembered only her botanical specimens, but Helena and her sister Vera had more colorful memories of stuffed animals

<sup>5</sup> Count Witte: *Memoirs*.



## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

and birds, ostriches, seals, crocodiles, and especially a white flamingo with long piercing beak, its wings outspread, scarlet-lined as though dripping blood, waiting to take flight. The Princess's library was at the far end of the museum wing and every evening after supper in the nursery, the children must say good-night to her, walking down the echoing corridors in the twilight between ghostly shadow shapes. The timid Vera tip-toed in a hurry, her eyes averted from the frightening monsters, but Helena sauntered at her ease and took advantage of the eerie atmosphere to play upon the other children's fears. For her the flamingo was serving an eternity of punishment: he had been changed into a brainless bird for a murder committed when he was a man; now he was condemned to wander forever in deserts and marshes, his white wings sprinkled with the blood of his victim.

Stimulated by her playmates' terror, Helena elaborated her yarns; her favorite stage setting was the sandy bottom of a prehistoric lake that yielded petrified relics, stones bearing the imprint of fishes and plants. Lying on her stomach, her elbows buried in the sand, she conjured up a vision of a battle of sea monsters waged on this very spot in ages past. She made the children see a mass of cool green water over their heads, with sunbeams piercing through to cast rainbow lights on the golden sand, the glowing coral reefs and stalactite caves; feathery green grasses and sea anemones waved to and fro and were transformed into mermaids and sea monsters. Suddenly Helena sat up, voice and manner brusquely changed. "Just fancy, a miracle" she told the children, "the earth suddenly opening, the air condensing around us and re-becoming sea waves . . . Look . . . Look . . . there they begin already appearing and moving. We are surrounded with water, we are right amid the mysteries and wonders of a submarine world. . . ." Helena sprang to her feet, her face contorted with terror, her voice hoarse with fright. For an instant she faced the oncoming wave,

## DANSE MACABRE

then fell upon the sand screaming and sobbing, "There's the wave . . . it has come . . . the sea . . . the sea . . . we are drowning . . . !!" And such was her power of suggestion that all her little audience hysterically fell on their faces, screaming, shuddering, convinced that the sea had engulfed them and that it was indeed the end.<sup>6</sup>

Helena Hahn's account of her childhood gives an impression of a self-conscious and self-centered girl, talented and versatile but notably lacking in warmth of affection. She had no tender memories of any relative or friend; the appreciation of her grandmother came from Count Witte, not from Helena. Her one concern was to draw a convincing picture of a child who from the cradle had commerce with spirits and sinister rites. But she tried too hard: the picture is overexposed. The discovery of a hypnotic power over her playmates was the most important experience of her childhood. It all began with the age-old custom of telling stories. The game of make-believe is universal, a phase of childhood usually discarded with dolls and toys. For Helena, however, this cardboard power to dominate, to frighten, perhaps to kill, had an abnormal fascination. She centered her life about this power, building upon this fragile foundation a complex emotional appeal approximating a religion.

Just in time to provide a more gorgeous setting for Helena's debut, General Fadeev was appointed Imperial Councillor to the Viceroy of the Caucasus, and the family moved from Saratov to an even more imposing palace in Tiflis. Before long, invitations to a Viceroy's ball created an impasse. Sixteen-year-old Helena refused to go. She was smarting over an unhappy love affair with Prince Alexander Galitsin, who had been constantly at the Fadeevs' paying court to Helena. An eligible beau, a cousin of the Viceroy's, he had especially attracted Helena because of his interest in occultism and magic. Indeed, Helena may well owe her career and her followers their Theosophy to the abiding influence of

<sup>6</sup> Sinnett: *Incidents*, p. 27.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

this brief love affair. Helena claimed that their engagement was broken by the death of the Prince; actually he had jilted her, leaving Tiflis abruptly.<sup>7</sup>

Glooming in the wreckage of young love, Helena vowed that she would not attend the Viceroy's ball. But attendance was obligatory upon families of the official staff and her grandfather sent word that, if necessary, the maids would dress her by force. Helena wrote in her scrap book:

"I then deliberately plunged my foot and leg into a kettle of boiling water and held it there until nearly boiled raw. Of course I scalded it horribly and remained at home for six months." She added a curious *non sequitur* to the incident, trying to fit it into her later advocacy of asceticism. She wrote: "I tell you there is nothing of the woman in me. When I was young, if a young man had dared to speak to me of love, I would have shot him like a dog who bit me."<sup>8</sup>

On the rebound from this distressing affair, Helena Hahn, a few weeks later, accepted the man whose name she carried through life. Three weeks before her seventeenth birthday, on July 7, 1848, Helena married General Nicephore Blavatsky, Vice-Governor of the neighboring province of Erivan on the Armenian border. Seeking to divert attention from Prince Galitsin, Helena sponsored numerous explanations of this marriage. She called the General her "plumeless raven," and said that he was seventy or eighty years old; actually he outlived her and was about forty at the time of their marriage. Her favorite story put the responsibility for the marriage upon her governess, who, scolding her for her tempers and tantrums, said that no man would dare to marry her, that she could not get even old General Blavatsky. Three days later, she had brought the General to his knees. Helena claimed that her family would not let her back out. It seems incongruous that the head-

<sup>7</sup> *Theosophist*, July 1913.

<sup>8</sup> H. P. Blavatsky: unpublished Scrapbook #22. See Mary K. Neff: *Personal Memoirs of H. P. Blavatsky*, p. 32.

## *DANSE MACABRE*

strong girl who parboiled her leg rather than go to a party should meekly submit to a repulsive marriage.

After a honeymoon of three unhappy months in Erivan, Helena managed to outwit the General's Cossack body-guard, secure a horse, and escape over mountain trails back to Tiflis. Perhaps the General was secretly glad to let her go. Certainly her grandfather was not glad to have her back. He could scarcely harbor the runaway bride of his colleague and he promptly shipped her off to her father in charge of a maid and three men servants. Colonel Hahn, retired and living near Saint Petersburg, traveled two thousand miles to Odessa to meet Helena, but he had his trip for nothing. She contrived to miss the steamer and to give her escort the slip. She sailed away—some say eloped—with the skipper of an English bark bound for Constantinople.

Barely seventeen years old, Helena had set out alone upon her vagabond years, leaving a deserted husband in Erivan, an irate grandfather in Tiflis, an enraged father pacing the docks at Odessa. For the next ten years she dropped out of their lives as completely as though she were dead.

## CHAPTER III



# *THE VAGABOND YEARS*

(1848—1873)

WHEN Helena was finally translated from sinner to saint, she sought to obscure the second period of her life with recklessly conflicting tales. In imitation of the famous saints who isolated themselves for meditation and training, H.P.B. claimed that between the ages of seventeen and forty-two she devoted herself to the study of occultism, circumnavigating the globe three times in her quest of the formulas of magic, alchemy, and the black arts.

Her contradictory stories and overlapping dates served two purposes. Spreading a smoke screen over the period made it easier to deny charges of scandalous conduct; after her creation of Theosophy she was determined to establish several years' residence in Tibet as a pupil of the Mahatmas, and this required juggling previously told stories of her adventures. She carried this confusion policy so far that her apologists explain that she was ordered by her Masters to conceal the true facts. Theosophists attempting to furnish a chronology of her life are reduced to printing alternative versions in parallel columns.

Four of Madame's conflicting stories about the year 1851 illustrate the impossibility of reconciling her recollections.

## THE VAGABOND YEARS

She had married and deserted her husband three years earlier, in 1848.

(1) Helena spent the summer of 1851 with General Blavatsky at Daraschi-Tchag, a resort on the plain of Mount Ararat. The bravest man in her husband's bodyguard was detailed as her personal escort, and he was the Kurd warrior whose spirit appeared at the Eddy farm séance. (*New York Graphic*, December 1, 1874, and Olcott: *People from the Other World*, p. 320).

(2) After welcoming the New Year of 1851 in Paris with the Countess Bagration, she visited Quebec in July. There she met her first American Indians, and they all "settled down for a long gossip over the mysterious doings of the medicine men." \* (Sinnett, *Incidents in the Life of Mme. Blavatsky*, p. 46).

(3) Helena was in London, staying at Mivart's Hotel with the old Countess Bagration and afterward at a big hotel between the City and the Strand, the name of which she had forgotten. Her father was not with her. (*Letters of H.P.B. to A. P. Sinnett*, p. 150).

(4) In London with her father in July, she encountered one of the Mahatmas in Hyde Park, was commissioned to found the Theosophical Society, and dedicated the rest of her life to the service of the Masters. (Countess Wachtmeister: *Reminiscences of H. P. Blavatsky*, pp. 56-8).

(5) It is almost too much to find H.P.B.'s spokesman and successor, Annie Besant, pushing her meeting with the Master ahead to 1853 and sending her in 1851 to almost the only spot in the world not already mentioned, South America! (Annie Besant: *H. P. Blavatsky and the Masters of Wisdom*, p. 11).

It would be a weariness to attempt to untangle the vast ball of yarns that H.P.B. wove about these vagabond years, incoherent, unrelated fragments. She made most of her

\* No one who has ever known an American Indian can imagine his unbending to confide in a passing tourist.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

travel talk ambiguous, forgetting dates, using "Mr. K." or a vague description instead of a name. She met a "young Englishman" in Germany. Later she sent for him to join her and "a Hindu mystic" in Mexico, and the three travelled half way round the world, landing in Bombay toward the end of 1852.

An exception to this nebulous style was an incident tucked into the last pages of *Isis Unveiled*, almost as an afterthought. It is important because it is one of the very few stories that even vaguely support H.P.B.'s claim of training with the Mahatmas in Tibet. Her vows of secrecy could apply to anything inconvenient to discuss, and she was elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp about places, routes, dates, and names. She even shifted responsibility for the following story by attributing it to a manuscript confided to her by an ex-parson, Mr. K.

The incident began in 1856 with her meeting Mr. K., mystic and former Lutheran minister, in Lahore. He was with two other mystics, the brothers N., and said that he knew her father, who had asked him "to try if he could find his errant daughter." When Helena learned that they were planning to enter Tibet, she joined what must have been a singularly unsophisticated party. Tibet is subject to China's influence, and the general policy has been, and still is, to refuse passports. This policy of Tibetan isolation had been assisted by the country's inaccessibility, its elevation, arctic climate, and natural mountain barriers. No army has ever crossed Tibet, and only a handful of explorers had then penetrated its borders. As no reprovisioning would be possible, a traveler would require elaborate and expensive equipment: pack train, coolies, interpreter, tents, bedding, stoves, enough consumable supplies for a return trip—food, water, and fuel.

Helena's associates seem to have set out as casually as boy scouts taking a weekend hike. They had little equipment, neither passports nor interpreter, and none of them spoke

## THE VAGABOND YEARS

the language. Mr. K. never crossed the border, for he was prostrated by fever while still in India and was forced to give up and return to Lahore. The brothers N., having no passports, were picked up and deported back to India before they had travelled sixteen miles in the forbidden territory. Helena, without a passport, wearing a disguise furnished by a mysterious Tartar shaman, and under supernatural guidance, penetrated "far into the interior of this inaccessible country."<sup>1</sup>

Although Mr. K. was not allowed to enter Tibet, he accompanied the party as far as the mud village of Leli in the province of Ladakh, where they witnessed a miracle in a Buddhist monastery. The Chief Lama refused to admit them to the compound until Helena exhibited a carnelian talisman given to her when she was a child by a high priest of a Calmuck tribe. The party then watched the rites attending the incarnation of a four-month-old infant who was lying on a carpet in the center of a great hall. Under the influence of a venerable lama, the baby rose to its feet and walked up and down the strip of carpet, repeating, "I am Buddha, I am the old Lama, I am his spirit in a new body." The three men in Helena's party were terrified. Mr. K. said that his blood ran cold, for the infant's eyes "seemed to search his very soul."

This incarnation story was merely an elaboration of adventures in Tibetan lamaseries to be found in the Abbé Huc's standard work of history embroidered with fantasy, *Recollections of Travel in Tartary, Thibet and China*. As told by Helena, it was of dubious value except for its psychological significance. For in this fantasy Madame Blavatsky showed her craving to surpass the exploits of mere men and a formidable jealousy of their role. Not only did she travel successfully in Tibet where the three men had all failed, but also it was her carnelian talisman that admitted them to the one notable experience of the trip.

<sup>1</sup> H. P. Blavatsky: *Isis Unveiled*, II, p. 599.



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

It is a tribute to Madame's persuasiveness that several explorers who contrived to reach Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, took the trouble to inquire about the Mahatmas. William Woodville Rockhill, who, as Secretary of the American Legation in Peking, had for many years unique opportunities to explore Tibet, reported that the Lamas were surprised and amused when told about the claims of Theosophy. In the famous monastery at Serok with seven hundred Lamas, they told him that although saints and sages in ancient times doubtless performed miracles, not even the wisest and most revered among them possessed such power today, and they solemnly warned him that his informants were imposing on his credulity and were probably heretics! <sup>2</sup>

The alleged period of residence in Tibet was another difficulty. Originally H.P.B. had claimed seven years, but her own stories left no seven-year period free. Her disciples tried to settle for an accumulation of seven years, but that did not work out either. The period dropped to three years, and even that did not fit. Finally it was explained that, as an advanced adept, H.P.B. did not have to bother about pack trains and consecutive years. She visited Tibet every night, if she desired, in her astral body, leaving her physical body at home in bed. True believers are quite satisfied with this interpretation. After all, the faithful in any cult are not so much concerned to discover facts as to continue to believe the things they want to believe. The chief value of Theosophy and of all cults is to provide a means of escape when life becomes too grim.

A travel schedule that took Helena three times around the world with numerous side jaunts raises the prosaic question: Who paid the bills?

Madame told a New York interviewer in 1874 that she was an heiress and a successful business woman. The Countess Bagration had left her \$40,000, which would have been much more "if I had been with her before her death." A

<sup>2</sup> William Woodville Rockhill: *Discoveries and Adventures in Tibet*.

## THE VAGABOND YEARS

little later, travelling in the Sudan, she made a small fortune buying ostrich feathers for a penny and selling them for from twenty-five to thirty dollars apiece. Unfortunately she dropped most of this money at the gaming tables of Hamburg and Baden-Baden.<sup>3</sup>

Theosophists rarely quote this interview; they prefer one of H.P.B.'s less spectacular explanations: that her father always had money waiting for her at cities agreed upon in advance. H.P.B. has drawn a blurred picture of her parents, with not one incident to suggest sympathy or understanding. The sparse memories of her father are unhappy: the hysterical scene at Bath, and leaving him fuming on the docks at Odessa. There is nothing to confirm the strange picture of an autocratic Russian colonel acquiescing in a surreptitious arrangement to finance the unchaperoned travels of his fugitive daughter.

### 2. PRODIGAL'S RETURN

(1858)

When Helena returned to Russia after an absence of ten years, she went first to Saint Petersburg to visit her sister and father. Vera, a young widow, was living in the village of Rugodevo, which she had inherited from her late husband. Helena said that she had just come from Paris, where she had known Daniel Home, the famous medium, who had converted her to spiritualism, and she required little urging to demonstrate her own mediumistic powers.

Phenomena rained down upon Helena like hailstones. Her tobacco pouch, matches, and handkerchief came rushing through the air in answer to her unspoken wish and dropped into her lap. One night as they sat at dinner the lamps and candles in the dining room suddenly extinguished themselves. When the servants brought in fresh lights, the chairs, table, and large sideboard were all lying upside down,

<sup>3</sup> *New York Graphic*, November 9, 1874.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

legs sprawling in the air. Most remarkable of all, nothing had been injured: not a plate was broken, there was not a scratch on the polished mahogany. Sometimes the spirits showed an impish humor. When the sisters read aloud the memoirs of Catherine Romanovna Dashkov, which had been heavily cut by the Russian censor, they were interrupted by messages rapped out on the table supplying the expurgated tidbits.

Colonel Hahn held himself aloof from the perpetual clatter of Helena's spirits; at family gatherings he occupied himself with his game of patience, insisting that it was all beneath his notice. Finally he consented to test his daughter's spirit controls. Smiling behind his gray mustache, he went into the next room to make sure that he was unobserved while he wrote out his question for the spirits. Returning, he listened sceptically as Vera repeated the alphabet over and over and the spirits indicated the next letter by raps. But when Vera showed him the word *Zaitchik* spelled out by the raps, he became deathly pale. Adjusting his spectacles, he took the paper in a trembling hand and then took from his pocket the paper on which he had written: "What was the name of my favorite war-horse, which I rode during my first Turkish campaign?" Below this, he had written the name *Zaitchik*.<sup>4</sup>

Impressed by this demonstration, the Colonel delighted in testing Helena's powers. Together, they undertook an elaborate genealogical research with information supplied by Helena's spirits, filling in gaps and carrying the family line back to the time of the first crusades against the Saracens. Now that he was convinced, the Colonel did not hesitate to sponsor his daughter's powers in public. When the police visited the village to investigate a gin-shop murder, the Colonel brought the superintendent to consult Helena, and she told him where to go. Sure enough, the incredulous

<sup>4</sup> Sinnett: *Incidents*, p. 74.

## THE VAGABOND YEARS

inspector found the murderer, just as Helena had said, burrowing into the haymow of a distant barn.

In an encounter with the Church, Helena also acquitted herself with credit. Vera persuaded her sister to accompany her to church one day: the famous Isidore, Metropolitan of Kiev, whom they had known in Tiflis, was reading the Mass. Recognizing them in the congregation, he sent a monk to invite them to call on him. The moment they were seated in the Lord Archbishop's residence, a terrifying hubbub set in, the furniture cracking and thumping, the great crystal chandelier swinging violently over their heads. Although spiritualism was outlawed in Russia by order of the Greek Orthodox Church, the Metropolitan took the performance in good part, asked which of the girls was the medium, condescended to ask the spirit control a test question, and was so impressed by the answer that he detained the girls for three hours. In the end, he dismissed Helena with a solemn blessing, condoning her mediumistic powers if she used them wisely. The incident parallels the Bible story of Christ confounding his elders in the Temple; it was a favorite device of Helena's to adapt to her own purposes scenes and phrases from the life of Christ.

Helena seems to have been ridden by a haunting sense of inferiority. To compensate, she indulged in fantasies of her superiority over the most powerful creature in her world, in any woman's world, Man. As a baby girl, she frightened a fourteen-year-old boy to his death. Three German mystics, all men, were turned back from Tibet while she alone entered the Promised Land. Now, she subjugated figures symbolizing the pillars of the society she had defied: her father for Family, the police for Government, the Metropolitan for the Church. Triumphant H.P.B. gave these stories to the public over her sister's signature. Helena single-handed against the world!

## CHAPTER IV



### VARIORUM EDITION

(1848—1873)

FORTUNATELY the recollections of two independent witnesses supplement Madame Blavatsky's accounts of her wander years. Sometime in 1850 or 1851, within a year or two of leaving Russia, the runaway bride met Albert Leighton Rawson, a young American from Chester, Vermont. His position is unique. He was the only person outside of her family who knew both the alluring young Helena with all the world before her and the overweight, disillusioned woman who turned up in New York after twenty-five years of roughing it. Author, artist, world traveler, Rawson received among numerous honors an LL.D. from Oxford University. When Helena first knew him, he was a precocious young scholar, fascinated by the mystery of the East. Disguised as a Mohammedan divinity student and travelling with Kamil Pasha as his secretary,<sup>1</sup> he had made the pilgrimage to Mecca with the annual caravan.

Rawson was happy to put his knowledge of Cairo and its secrets at the service of "the charming young widow" who, he remembered many years later, "could fascinate the most indifferent man in a single interview!" The gusty flavor of

<sup>1</sup> *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, on A. L. Rawson.

his admiration leaps up from the brittle pages of his memoir, bringing to life for an instant the fragrance and magic of an Egyptian spring a century ago.<sup>2</sup> He was fascinated by Helena's combination of femininity and masculine wilfulness. She often dressed in men's clothes. Disguised as Moslem dandies, the two young people loitered in the bazaars, studied Osirian mysteries, visited Shaik Yusuf ben Makerzi, chief of the Egyptian serpent-charmers, who taught them to handle live snakes. Mounted on camels, they rode out to Gizeh and the Pyramids, spending three nights in the Pyramids of Cheops.

Rawson introduced Helena to Paulos Metamon, the famous Copt magician. They found him in a setting of Oriental grandeur, walls hung with rare rugs and prints, a library of astrological formulas and magical incantations inscribed on ancient parchments, bubbling hookahs, incense burning in tripods, tame serpents coiling lazily among the low velvet cushions. After salaams and tiny cups of thick, syrupy coffee, young Rawson made his request: "We are students who have heard of your great learning and skill in magic, and we wish to learn at your feet."

Compliments passed back and forth, and finally the great man made answer. It was anticlimax, but it came down to this: if they had the price he would be happy to oblige. Fortunately Rawson had ample means, and Helena, who had so far managed to escape from all her teachers, applied herself for the next three months as an eager student of the black arts. Enchanted with her initiation into the elements of magic, she showed off her tricks as artlessly as a child. Returning to Shepherd's Hotel, they stopped in to see the Countess Kissalev, a friend of the Fadeevs' whom they happened to meet in Cairo. With a showman's patter about solving the mysteries of Egypt, Helena terrified the Countess by letting loose a live serpent from a bag she had concealed in the folds of her skirt.

<sup>2</sup> *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, February 1892.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

Another afternoon, when these three had been watching the sunset across the desert, Helena broke the silence: "I have before me forty years in which to build a more enduring fame than that of the builder of the Great Pyramid, for who was he anyway? Only a name, an oppressor of his fellow men. I will bless mankind by freeing them from their mental bondage. I know I was intended to do a great work."

"And is this visit to Egypt part of your plan?" asked the Countess. Helena replied that Rawson and she had come to Egypt to see the relics of an ancient civilization and that for the present they were studying the ways of snake charmers.

At this time Helena began taking hashish. The use of drugs to facilitate visions and fantasies is a phase of occultism that is not generally discussed, but hashish is popular in the Orient, and western devotees visiting the East are likely to make experiments. Except for the second or going-under stage of chloroform, hashish is the only drug that simulates the hypnotic state. For a neophyte straining to see visions, it has a powerful appeal: it puts our drab world under a rose-colored magnifying glass. A ditch swells into a roaring river, the dullest conversation sparkles with wit, the flutter from turning the pages of a book borrows the grandeur of a thunderstorm.

When Rawson knew Madame Blavatsky in New York City twenty-five years after their life in Egypt, she still depended on the drug. She told him that "hasheesh multiplies one's life a thousand fold," and that her experiences under its influence were as real as actual life. "It is a wonderful drug and it clears up profound mysteries." For Helena it provided a thrilling extension of her powers of make-believe.

### 2. COUNT WITTE

A second witness immune to the pressure and bias of Theosophy has left an authoritative account of Helena's early adventures. The most distinguished relative of Madame Blavatsky's own generation was her first cousin, Count

## VARIORUM EDITION

Sergei Yulievich Witte. His mother, Madame Witte, was a younger sister of Helena's mother, and she and her sons, like Helena, were members of the hospitable Fadeev household. Eighteen years Helena's junior, Count Witte was as familiar as she with the Fadeev ménage, the brilliant grandmother, and all the intimate gossip and family skeletons.

Count Witte is chiefly remembered in this country as the statesman who represented Russia during the peace negotiations with Japan, conducted at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1904 on the invitation of Theodore Roosevelt. For more than a decade the Count had been one of the most powerful figures in the Empire, performing the duties of Prime Minister while he held the title of Finance Minister. He had doubled the national revenue, controlled the fluctuations of the currency, resumed specie payment, and greatly extended his country's influence in Asia and the Near East. Political complications following his country's defeat by Japan caused the Count's retirement at the early age of sixty, and he proceeded to write his autobiography.<sup>3</sup>

Sketching in his family background, the Count devoted several pages to his eccentric cousin Yelena (he used the Russian spelling), beginning her story in 1848 when she deserted her husband and stowed away aboard an English craft with an obliging skipper. After an interval that presumably covered the Rawson interlude, her family heard that she was appearing as an equestrienne in a Constantinople circus; it was there that Metrovitch, a popular operatic bass, fell in love with her. Helena abandoned her gently swaying white circus horse to accompany the singer on his tours of the capitals of Europe. There was a raising of family eyebrows when General Fadeev grimly read aloud a letter from Metrovitch signed "your affectionate grandson." The singer apparently considered himself Helena's husband, and the family speculated about General Blavatsky's failure to secure a divorce.

<sup>3</sup> Count Witte: *Memoirs*.



## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

They had scarcely assimilated Metrovitch when the schoolboy Witte noticed in the morning mail for his grandfather an envelope bearing an American postage stamp; the same day the General sourly announced another grandson! The letter was from a young Englishman who wrote that he and Helena were married and that she had accompanied him on a business trip to America. He may have been the original of the young Englishman whom Helena said she summoned to accompany her from America to Bombay in 1852.

After another interval the Tiflis household heard that Helena was back in Paris and had "become the right hand" of the celebrated medium, Daniel Home. From time to time the family saw in the European press paragraphs they thought referred to Helena; they identified her with a Madame Laura who was giving pianoforte concerts in London and Paris; she had been appointed manager of the royal choir in the court of King Milan of Servia.

The gossip about his cousin's lurid adventures left Sergei Witte eager to see the family black sheep, and he was disappointed. She was only thirty years old, but she had already lost her figure and put on excess weight; the Count remembered that her face "bore all the traces of a tempestuous and passionate life," and he was shocked by her indifference to appearances. She lolled about in loose morning wrappers, rarely troubling herself with formal dress; "she was but a ruin of her former self." Yet the old Count, after a diplomatic career among the court beauties of Europe, paid gallant tribute to Helena's eyes, enormous, azure-colored, sparkling in an indescribable fashion when she was animated; never again in all his life had he looked into eyes like hers.

When Helena returned to Russia in 1858 after an absence of ten years, she found her grandfather, General Fadeev, unwilling to welcome the prodigal back to her old home in

## VARIORUM EDITION

Tiflis. His high position made him vulnerable to indiscreet relatives. After two years with her sister Vera at Rugodevo, it was arranged for the sisters to visit their grandfather, driving in a coach with posthorses from Moscow to Tiflis, a three-week trip.

The Fadeevs lived as always in feudal state, keeping open house with an inside staff of eighty-four serfs to care for the great household. Beneath the glittering surface elemental forces struggled. Scores of young liberals, some of Helena's childhood friends, had joined the nihilists; aristocrats though they were, their young hearts responded to the tortured struggle of the Russian masses for freedom. Forced underground by the ferocity of Imperial opposition, the nihilists resorted to dynamite and assassination and were punished with death and exile to Siberia. Five years later, in 1866, this revolutionary underground won an amazing victory, the freeing of the serfs.

Helena's writings reflect little or no awareness of this bloody ferment seething about her. She reveled in the palace drawing rooms, discovering new beauties in the Gobelin tapestries, gift of the Empress Catherine, loitering in the lofty halls, lined with family portraits of bygone Princes and Princesses Dolgoruki. Ten years in the capitals of Europe had made her more aware of such things.

Because spiritualism was proscribed by church and state, the young people had to delay their séances until General Fadeev was out of the way. Each evening at precisely quarter of eleven, his warmly muffled feet swishing softly along the parquet floors, the General retired to his private apartment upstairs. That was the signal for a procession of serfs to file silently down the halls under the eyes of the old portraits, bearing on silver trays the supper to be served in the drawing room behind closed doors. To the popping of champagne corks, the smart set of the Caucasus laughed and bantered and waited impatiently to resume the weird experiences of

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

the previous evening. They were fascinated by Helena's boldness in striking out beyond the routine question and answer of the conventional medium.

Helena's spirits were untamed ghosts who stopped at nothing, treating diseases, dictating Latin prescriptions, revealing scandalous secrets about anyone so indiscreet as to doubt their credentials. Surprising novelties kept everyone in suspense. Mysterious letters and little souvenirs (*apports*) materialized in odd corners; Helena could change the weight of persons and of furniture at will; when she told her brother Leonid that he could not move the small chess table, he found that it stood as though screwed to the floor until she released it, when he lifted it up light as a feather.

Young Witte could not understand the craze over what seemed to him mere sleight-of-hand: "It was apparently this unattractive woman who turned the heads of a great many society people in Tiflis. She did it by means of spiritualistic séances, which she conducted in our house." Although she had been there before him, Witte regarded Helena as an outsider and resented her turning his home into a séance parlor. Night after night she took the spotlight, holding the gilded youth of the Caucasus spellbound until dawn. Count Vorontzov-Dashkov, the two Counts Orlov-Davidov, the young adjutants and staff of the Grand Duke in gorgeous uniforms, handsome Georgian Princes—they were all men who crowded around Helena. The women stayed at home.

Begging her grandfather's permission to return to Tiflis, Helena had promised to mend her ways, even to patch up matters with General Blavatsky, who, surprisingly, was willing to take her back. He was now living in Tiflis, a member of the Viceroy's staff. The reconciliation lasted long enough to re-establish a home, but, wrote the Count, "It was not given to her (Helena) to walk in the paths of righteousness for any length of time." One day her former lover, Metrovitch, accosted her on the street. His golden days as a favorite were past; taking what he could get, he had signed a

## VARIORUM EDITION

contract to sing Italian opera in remote Tiflis, and perhaps he was hoping to make up with Helena. Still under the singer's spell, she deserted her "aged" General to return to a man at least ten years his senior!

The resulting scandal forced the couple to disappear—as far as Kiev, which provided only a brief haven. Metrovitch picked up enough of the language to sing in Russian opera, and Helena, in the meantime, was renewing her girlhood acquaintance with Prince Dundukov-Korsakov, Governor General of Kiev. She undertook to introduce him to the world of occultism, but her spirits took liberties with the Governor General to which he could not accommodate himself even when looking into Helena's beautiful eyes. Neither could Helena accommodate herself to the censored and circumscribed Russia of her day. One morning Kiev found a doggerel libelling the Prince pasted on the doorways and telegraph posts. In the resulting investigation Helena was implicated as author of the verses. Again she and Metrovitch disappeared overnight.

### 3. OFF THE RECORD

Agardi Metrovitch was the most sensational figure in Count Witte's recollections of Helena. As long as she lived she expurgated from Theosophical literature all mention of Metrovitch or of her illegitimate child, born in the early 1860's. Off the record she wrote her biographer, Sinnett, fantastic yarns to explain the scandalous rumors current about her. When he, believing them, begged for permission to print, she performed the ticklish task of convincing him that these stories were dynamite without cracking his faith in her. By one of the rare chances of the world of letters, the record of this literary legerdemain has been preserved.

All H.P.B.'s correspondence was carefully filed by Sinnett, including these confidential letters discussing what should and should not be printed and why. Sinnett outlived Madame by thirty years; after his death this material went to his

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

literary executor, Maude Hoffman, also a Theosophist. She authorized the publication of everything, including the famous, secret Mahatma letters, in 1924-5. Annie Besant expelled Miss Hoffman from the Theosophical Society and tried to boycott the books, but she could not unpublish them. Theosophists have had a hard time assimilating this material in public, for it is most revealing. It shows Madame's ingenious techniques for explaining away embarrassing situations, an almost daily routine for her. Frequently she made the explanation so incoherent and coiled around upon itself that the brain grew numb with fatigue and in the end the listener murmured sleepily, "Uh-huh, I guess so." She wrote two such letters about Metrovitch, four thousand words, ultra-confidential, building up a series of incredible and yet carefully equivocal situations.

Agardi Metrovitch had been her devoted friend ever since 1850. A Hungarian from Metrovitz, he had adopted the place name as his own because he was nameless, being the natural son of the Duke of Lucea, who had brought him up. He was a follower of Mazzini, a *carbonaro*, "a revolutionist of the worst kind, a fanatical rebel." Helena hinted that she had saved him from the gallows in Austria, where he lived after being exiled from Rome because of insulting the Pope.

In outline, H.P.B.'s story and the Count's conform well enough. When visiting Russia, H.P.B. said that she "found" Metrovitch in Tiflis in 1861 and in Odessa in 1870 where "my relatives knew him well and he was friends with my cousins Witte."<sup>4</sup> She provided Metrovitch with a mistress, Sophie Cruvelli, and with a wife, Teresina, who had been her "best friend" until her death in 1865. She even drew a pen-and-ink sketch of the wife, dressed as Marguerite in *Faust*, and dated, "Tiflis, 7 Avril, 1869." If there really was a wife, she was never mentioned by the Count or the Fadeevs, and was apparently unknown to them.

In 1870, according to H.P.B.'s confidential letter to Sin-

<sup>4</sup> *Letters H.P.B.*, pp. 144, 189.

## VARIORUM EDITION

nett, Metrovitch had arrived in Odessa to find Auntie Fadeev worrying about her niece Helena, who, by that time, had been on her own for twenty-two years. At all events, the aunt induced Metrovitch to run over to Egypt, find Helena, and bring her home, very much as Colonel Hahn had asked "Mr. K." to find Helena in India! Metrovitch, arriving in Cairo, had the misfortune to encounter several Roman Catholics who were still mulling over his affront to the Pope of seven years earlier, and who now hired Maltese gangsters to kill him.

Supernatural warning of the danger from her Master Ilarion induced Helena to take prompt action: "I made Agardi Metrovitch come direct to me and never leave the house for ten days." The usefulness of this incident for explaining away compromising gossip needs no comment. After ten days Metrovitch refused to continue hiding behind Helena's skirts and set out on foot for Alexandria. Helena was delayed by having to pack and ship her pet monkeys; when she reached Alexandria, Metrovitch had not arrived. Retracing her steps, she learned that he had stopped at a small hotel where the proprietor, a Maltese, had been seen talking to two monks. Metrovitch had a glass of lemonade—yes, lemonade—and went on his way, but in the next village, Ramleh, he fell down unconscious. In a small hotel in Ramleh, Helena finally found him sick in bed with a high fever, and with a monk in his room. After calling the police to eject the monk, Helena cared for the dying man through ten days of delirium. When the end came on April 19, 1870, the Church refused to bury him; even the Freemasons were afraid to touch him because he had been a *carbonaro* and a revolutionist. Aided by an Abyssinian occultist, Helena herself buried the dead man, hiring a hotel servant to dig a grave under a tree on the seashore and sending for Egyptian fellahs to carry the corpse. According to Count Witte, Helena's lover was shipwrecked and drowned. This finale may well be an adapted version of an actual seaside burial of

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

Metrovitch, whose body was probably washed ashore after the shipwreck. "In the evening we buried his poor body. Then I took up my monkeys . . . and went back to Odessa. That's all."

Sinnett was delighted by the color and action of this story. His biography of Madame was bogging down under long-winded tales of her magical powers, and he was unhappily conscious that it needed a shot in the arm. Still too bemused to appreciate the absurdity of H.P.B.'s recollections, he begged for more material about Metrovitch. H.P.B. took fright. Admitting that she had not told all, she spun another yarn to account for meeting Metrovitch in Constantinople in 1850. It seems that she had stumbled over his apparently dead body one night returning to Missire's Hotel. He had been stabbed in the back by Maltese ruffians hired by the Jesuits. She had stood guard four hours before her guide found anyone willing to pick up the singer's body for her. A chance Turkish policeman, passing by, offered to roll the supposed corpse into a ditch, "then showing a decided attraction to my own rings, and bolting only when he saw my revolver pointing at him. Then I had the man [Metrovitch] carried to a Greek hotel over the way."

The first of Helena's letters had described Metrovitch's death in 1870. In the second, supposed to reach back to 1850, she used again her device of an illness that explained their occupying the same room, and repeated also her amateurish melodrama, hired ruffians, plotting Jesuits, difficulties in getting assistance. The letter continued, tracing her friendship with Metrovitch through the years to Florence, where he sang in the Pergola, to Rome and Venice, back to Tiflis in 1861—and always chaperoned by his wife!

At this point in her letter, H.P.B. abruptly introduced two new figures, Baron Meyendorf and the illegitimate son, Youry. The child is officially vouched for by a passport dated August 23, 1862, "to the wife of Civil Counsellor Blavatsky, attaché of the Viceroy of the Caucasus, and their

## VARIORUM EDITION

infant ward Youry, to proceed to the provinces of Tauris, Cherson and Pskoff for the term of one year.”<sup>5</sup> H.P.B. claimed to have adopted the child to protect the reputation of a woman relative. It would have been an indiscreet gesture for a young woman separated from her husband and recently returned after an unexplained absence of ten years. (See Appendix B, page 319.)

### 4. THE MYSTERY OF OZOORGETTY

(1861-3)

At about the time of Youry's birth, Helena was prostrated by “one of those mysterious nervous diseases that baffle science,” wrote sister Vera.<sup>6</sup> She had left Tiflis sometime in 1861 or 1862 to bury herself in the wilds of Georgia and Mingrelia, border provinces of the Trans-Caucasus, reached only by primitive trails. Riding horseback, protected by a bodyguard from the bandits infesting these semi-tropical forests, Helena reached Ozoorgetty in the province of Mingrelia, where she bought herself a house, a puzzling whim for a foot-loose wanderer. According to Vera she was establishing an agency for the sale of rare woods. In addition to its woods, the place offered a unique combination of facilities: total isolation and the medical services of an army doctor, for it was a Russian outpost. It was probably through her army friends that Helena settled upon this unlikely spot for her accouchement.

H.P.B.'s account of the illness, as dictated to her sister Vera, is as fantastic as one might expect, and omits any mention of Youry. For four months she lay consumed by fever, taking only a few sips of water for days at a time, reduced to a skeleton. At this point Helena produced an ingenious theory to serve as a psychic red herring. Long before Morton Prince and his multiple personalities, Helena was fumbling with the theory of a double personality. When the

<sup>5</sup> Mary K. Neff: *Personal Memoirs of H. P. Blavatsky*, p. 184.

<sup>6</sup> Sinnett: *Incidents*, p. 115.



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

army doctor called her by name, she said that she could rouse herself to open her eyes and respond normally, but as soon as she was alone, she relapsed into her "usually half-dreamy condition and became *somebody else*." She insisted that she was not delirious; when awake, she remembered all about her second self and what she had been doing, but the reverse was not true: "When somebody else, I had no idea of who was H. P. Blavatsky. I was in another far-off country, a totally different individuality from myself."

The Ozoorgetty episode ended in a nightmare journey through forests and down rivers, recalling Dante's adventures in Purgatory. The Doctor, unable to cure Helena, sent her home. She was too delicate to endure the jolting of a horse, and they put her into a large boat with a native crew who rowed her a four-day journey down the river, attended by spectral apparitions all the way. Every night the terrified oarsmen saw a ghostly figure gliding over the waters, beckoning to them, leading them on. When they reached Kutais, the panic-stricken crew plunged back into the forest, leaving Helena's old butler to get her back to Tiflis as best he might.

Helena charged the paternity of the child to Baron Nicholas Meyendorf, one of the young bloods who had been fascinated by her nightly séances. However, her own account suggests Metrovitch as the probable father. In her second letter to Sinnett, in the midst of a paragraph about the singer, and without one word of explanation as to who Youry was, she suddenly began an incoherent account of Youry's death. She had, she wrote, found Metrovitch in Tiflis in 1861:

*Then my relatives knew him [Metrovitch] well, and he was friends with my cousins Witte. Then, when I took the poor child to Bologna to see if I could save him, I met him [Metrovitch] again in Italy and he did all he could for me, more than a brother. Then the child died; and as it had no papers or documents and I did not care to give my name in food to the kind gossips, it was he, Metrovitch, who undertook all the job, who buried the aristocratic Baron's [Meyendorf's] child under his,*

## VARIORUM EDITION

*Metrovitch's name, saying 'he did not care,' in a small town of southern Russia in 1867. After this, without notifying my relatives of my having returned to Russia to bring back the unfortunate little boy whom I did not succeed to bring back alive to the governess chosen for him by the Baron, I simply wrote the child's father to notify him of this pleasant occurrence for him, and returned to Italy with the same passport.*

The point of this tumbling incoherence was that Sinnett must not refer to Metrovitch or to the child, not even if he suppressed their names; "better be hung than mention any of it"; a hurricane of dirt would be thrown at her . . . the Baron Meyendorfs and all the Russian aristocracy would rise against her if the Baron's name were even mentioned, and Daniel Home, the Baron's friend would be the first to denounce her. Besides which, people would not believe the story; even her own father had suspected her and almost refused to forgive her, "though afterward he pitied and loved that poor crippled child . . . I have done too much toward proving and swearing the child was mine, and have overdone the thing."<sup>7</sup>

Long after the death of all the principals, a surviving Baroness Meyendorf, sister-in-law of Baron Nicholas told his side of the story. The Baron had admitted a liaison with Helena but insisted that Metrovitch was the father of the baby. The Baron and his brother finally agreed to make certain payments; photographs of Helena with the child were preserved at the Meyendorf home in Estonia until its destruction during the Russian Revolution.<sup>8</sup>

Neither Vera nor the aunt ever referred in print to Metrovitch, the Baron Meyendorf, or the child, which would seem to qualify them as family skeletons. Vera summed up her expurgated account of this period with self-conscious brevity. Helena had always refused to discuss her mysterious illness in Ozoorgetty with anyone and as soon as she was able had left the Caucasus and returned to Italy.

<sup>7</sup> *Letters H.P.B.*, pp. 144, 151.

<sup>8</sup> E. Bechofer Roberts: *Mysterious Madame*, p. 51.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

These alibi stories of Helena's about her lovers and her child were alike in their nightmarish unreality. They were dreams, daydreams, and as such offer interesting clues and symptoms to psychiatrists and especially to Freudians. It is astonishing that Sinnett could have accepted these stories in good faith, and that they do not appear to disturb Madame's present disciples. They make a pitiful picture, but they help to clarify the emotional conflict that led H.P.B. twenty-five years later to secure a curiously worded medical memorandum, which she inaccurately called a certificate of virginity. True believers piously accept this certificate for what H.P.B. said it was; to them it offers satisfactory refutation of the scandalous charges against their beloved teacher.

### 5. THE 1860's

Helena, Metrovitch, and Youry lived in Italy during most of the child's brief span of life. In contrast to her flood of conflicting stories about the decade of the 50's, Helena was reticent about the 60's. Her followers take advantage of her silence to assert that she spent these years in Tibet, ignoring the impossibility of taking a crippled infant on such a journey. These were the only years of domesticity that Helena was ever to know.

Within a few months of the child's death in 1867, the action picked up and things began to happen again. Helena and Metrovitch, after burying the child in southern Russia, returned to Italy. On November 2 of the same year, she claimed to have been in the thick of the bloody battle of Mentana, fighting as a volunteer under Garibaldi. She had a number of scars that she used to prove this story; shortly after meeting Olcott at the Eddy farm she showed him a wound below her heart, a stiletto stab received in this battle. The wound had reopened a little and she wanted his advice! She also showed him marks on her left arm, broken in two places by sabre strokes, and she let him feel the bullets in

## VARIORUM EDITION

her leg and right shoulder. She told this Mentana story for about ten years and then suppressed it, writing to Sinnett in 1886, "Please do not speak of Mentana, I implore you." Another trip to India finished off the decade of the 60's, and on this her fourth attempt, she entered Tibet. She avoids details.

The next important Theosophical date was 1870 when the aunt, Madame Fadeev, received a miraculous letter. It is preserved and venerated as the first in the long series of Mahatmic writings that constitutes Theosophical scripture. Madame Fadeev was at home in Odessa; her niece Helena was on the other side of the world, no one knew where. They had not heard from her for years and were ready to believe her dead. On November 11, 1870, an Asiatic messenger appeared in Madame Fadeev's house, handed her a letter, and disappeared before her eyes. The missive was written in French on Chinese rice paper and was addressed: "*A l'Honorable, Très Honorable Dame, Nadyéjda Andréewna Fadeew, Odessa.*" Translated, it read:

*The noble relations of Mme. H. Blavatsky have no cause whatsoever for grief. Their daughter and niece has not left this world at all. She is living, and desires to make known to those whom she loves that she is well and quite happy in the distant and unknown retreat which she has selected for herself. She has been very ill, but is so no longer; for under the protection of the Lord Sangyas (Buddha) she has found devoted friends who guard her physically and spiritually. The ladies of her house should therefore remain tranquil. Before eighteen new moons shall have risen, she will return to her family.<sup>9</sup>*

This letter of 1870 made its public appearance not earlier than June 1884. At that time Madame Fadeev wrote to Colonel Olcott describing its receipt and enclosing the original. Both Sinnett and Olcott in their memoirs, published several years later, ignored this important first com-

<sup>9</sup> *Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom*, First Series, p. 101. (Hereafter referred to in the notes as *Letters M.W.*)

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

munication from the Masters, which would be enough in itself to discredit the letter, one of Helena's efforts to establish her claim to early contacts with her hierarchy.

Count Witte's *Memoir* furnishes further evidence that this supernatural letter was an after-thought. The Count was an undergraduate at the University of Odessa in 1870, and Helena, far from being "on the other side of the world," was right there in Odessa, courageously trying to support herself and the aging Metrovitch.

General Fadeev had died, leaving his own and his wife's estate in ruins. Overconfident of the immediate development of the natural resources of the Caucasus, he had invested everything in those fabulous oil and mineral deposits which were to enrich not his, but later generations. The General's household scattered, to make shift as they might. Two of Helena's aunts, Madame Witte and Madame Fadeev, moved to Odessa in order to put the Witte boys through the University. And in Odessa they found their niece still living with Metrovitch a hand-to-mouth existence.

Helena had tried giving music lessons to children, but the little darlings made her nervous, and her picturesque oaths were not well received by the parents. She next managed to raise enough capital to plunge through a succession of businesses that died on her hands, an ink factory, a retail shop, a factory and store for artificial flowers. Sergei Witte, coming home from the University in the afternoon, found her calling on his mother. Sometimes he stopped at her shops to see how she was making out. Funds and credit finally exhausted, Helena and Metrovitch set sail for Cairo, where he hoped to sing in Italian opera.

The theosophists have never published a scholarly study of their founder's life, but they have produced a five-foot shelf of apologetics, a few of which are skilfully evasive. Following their policy of seeking to discredit witnesses who challenge their legends, they accuse Count Witte of being too young to remember his cousin, though he knew her

## VARIORUM EDITION

from his twelfth to twentieth years, and of being too old to remember the facts when he wrote his memoirs although he was only in his early sixties.

The Count's character and fame, his intimate knowledge of Helena up to her final departure from Russia in 1871, and his disinterested attitude make him an authoritative source of information. He lost all touch with her during the final period, her Theosophical career, and erroneously assumed that she founded her Society in England and died in Paris. But his narrative of the controversial second period of her life, mentioning her travels in the Americas and to Constantinople, Cairo, and Servia corresponds closely with the high spots in most of the versions of Helena's own conflicting stories.

It is, moreover, unreasonable to imagine that this distinguished statesman would stoop to slander a woman cousin. On the contrary, he made no reference to the disagreeable episode of the illegitimate child. He wrote of Helena in a good-humored, appreciative tone, quite free from animus. The intrigues and lax morals of the aristocracy, the frailty and impulsiveness of youth—it was all an old story. Helena's adventures were common gossip among her set all over the Continent, and the Count's references to this entertaining adventuress only repeated stories that were well known and taken for granted.<sup>10</sup>

Summing up his impression of Helena, Count Witte was

<sup>10</sup> Count Witte's comments on the United States bear out the impression of a fastidious and outspoken man. He said that he had only one decent luncheon and dinner all the time he was here, and they were on board Pierpont Morgan's yacht the day he was taken to visit West Point. Food at the old Waldorf seemed to him fabulously expensive, 30 and 40 rubles per plate (ruble, 50 cents), and exceedingly bad. He was astonished by the simplicity of the Presidential ménage when he visited Oyster Bay and said it reminded him of the summer home of a humble burgher. The Theodore Roosevelts' luncheon was worse than their house: there was no tablecloth and they served icewater instead of wine, which was "for a European almost indigestible." He was also shocked by the President's custom of preceding Mrs. Roosevelt in entering a room. Having thrown off the yoke of diplomacy, the Count enjoyed the luxury of speaking his mind.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

cordially appreciative of her energy, versatility, facility in picking up new skills. Although sceptical of her supernatural phenomena, he was impressed with "her gift for hypnotizing her hearers and herself into believing the wildest inventions of her fantasy." His personal acquaintance with his cousin ended as she departed for Cairo with her tarnished lover, "a toothless lion perennially at the feet of his mistress, an aged lady, stout and slovenly." Helena was forty, which seems aged to arrogant twenty.

The S.S. *Eumonia*, on which the singer and his lady sailed, was, according to Helena, loaded with gunpowder and firearms. On June 21, 1871, the cargo exploded. Of four hundred passengers only seventeen were saved. Helena had gruesome memories of floating in the water and seeing limbs, heads, and trunks falling all about her. She failed to mention Metrovitch, but the Count said that he lost his life in saving Helena's. She was put ashore at Alexandria with nothing but the dripping clothes on her back. She had lost youth, family, husband, child, lover. She had neither the training nor temperament for earning a living. It was a dreary outlook for "an aged lady, stout and slovenly."

### 6. A MEDIUM IN CAIRO

(1872-3)

The death of Metrovitch was a bitter blow, but Helena kept on to Cairo. The popularity of her amateur séances in Tiflis inspired her to turn this skill to account. To differentiate herself from shabby back-parlor mediums, she organized a Société Spirite, appointed officers, issued a grandiose prospectus, and advertised in the spiritualist press of London and Paris for mediums to come to Cairo to assist her. Hurrying along the Sekke el Ghamma el Hamar (Street of the Red Mosque) one day, she bumped into a forlorn-looking English woman, Emma Cutting, lodging-house keeper. Miss Cutting wondered who she was and her companion



*Count Sergei Yulievich Witte, Russian statesman,*



*Albert P. Sinnott, H.P.B.'s biographer and all-*





*Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, whom H.P.B. brevetted Co-Founder  
of The Theosophical Society*

told her. "She is that Russian spiritist who calls the dead and makes them answer your questions." She was known, he said, as Madame Blavatsky and also as Madame Metrovitch. Miss Cutting's only brother had died recently and she was interested. She knew the Greek whom Madame had appointed secretary of her Société and she asked him to take her to the next séance. It was a disappointment, no raps, no spirits; Madame explained that the room must be especially purified.

The next time that Miss Cutting looked in she found Madame and the Greek at work lining the walls and ceiling of a closet off the bedroom with red calico, leaving a space of about three inches behind the cloth. A few days later she witnessed a small riot; Madame had disappeared, and the room was full of people "using most offensive language" about her, complaining that she had taken their money and cheated them. They had pulled down the red cloth lining and found pieces of string hanging from a long glove stuffed with cotton, used to represent the materialized hand and arm of a spirit. Madame later explained to Miss Cutting that she had nothing to do with the dummy arm, which must have been the work of Madame Sebire, a medium she had living with her. However, the exposure killed the Société, and Madame was soon down to her last franc. Miss Cutting came to the rescue and not only gave Madame a room in her house, but made several loans to tide her over.

In later years Madame bitterly attacked spiritualism and its demoralizing effect on mediums; she tried to justify the Société on the ground that it was a research group organized to study and reform spiritualism, but the evidence is against Madame. Her own letters show that she was associated with that pathetic group which floats with the tides of the cities of Asia and the Near East. She called them "amateur mediums," but she had no illusions about them and wrote her aunt that they were "mostly beggarly tramps when not adventuresses in the rear of M. de Lesseps' army of engineers

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

and workmen on the canal of Suez"; they stole her money, drank like fishes, and cheated the patrons with bogus tricks. After several scenes in which she, as the proprietor, was held responsible for their frauds, she turned them all out, and then—she never could resist a touch of melodrama—she was nearly shot by a madman, her Greek associate, the secretary of the Société Spirite, "who got possessed, I suppose, by some vile spook."

The monkeys and Helena and, oddly enough, Madame Sebire, the medium she had accused of fraud, all turned up without warning in Odessa that summer of 1872. Helena remained for less than a year. Although she was always beligerently loyal to her native land, this was her final effort to conform to its *mores*. Away from her family she remembered them with choking emotion; together, they quarreled bitterly. Dropping the monkeys and Madame Sebire along the way, Helena moved to Paris in March 1873 to live with her cousin, Nicholas Hahn.

Evidence of Helena's defensiveness about these vagabond years is found in her persistent efforts to furnish credentials of respectability, a quality taken for granted unless it is notoriously lacking. Colonel Olcott dug up a testimonial sounding like a reference for a nursemaid in answer to charges that H.P.B. had been running wild during her four months in Paris. Lydia Marquette of New York City, who had been studying in the Paris hospitals, wrote the Colonel that she had been with Madame constantly and that she could certify that Madame's "behavior was unexceptionable and such as to entitle her to every respect."<sup>11</sup> According to Lydia, Madame was staying not with her cousin, but with her brother, Leonid, and she also gave a different address from that used by Madame. Altogether, the testimonial seems to do Madame's case more harm than good.

After creating her Mahatmas, H.P.B. sought to weave

<sup>11</sup> Henry S. Olcott: *Old Diary Leaves*, Vol. I, p. 27. (Hereafter referred to in the notes as Olcott: *O.D.L.*)

## *VARIORUM EDITION*

them into this period. She had intended to settle down in Paris indefinitely, she said, when suddenly on a night in June 1873 the Masters ordered her to sail for New York the very next day, though she barely had enough money to pay for her passage. She was commissioned to clean up the abuses of spiritualism.

The fact is, however, as Madame admitted on another occasion, that she sailed for this Land of Opportunity in the mood of many another emigrant, hoping to cut away her past and all its complications, its scandalous gossip, its tragic memories, hoping to begin life anew. When her disciple, Sinnett, was working on her memoir she told him that he could relax the rigid censorship with her arrival in New York City: "From that time on, let the public know all."

## CHAPTER V



### *LAND OF OPPORTUNITY*

(1873)

ON her silver wedding day, July 7, 1873, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky landed at Castle Garden in New York City. She may have remembered the date; most women do. For twenty-five years she had taken the ups and downs of a roller-coaster life, loved and hated, squandered and gambled one season, pinched pennies the next, traveled, explored arcane mysteries; she had savored life greedily for the years of her blooming. Passing under the shadow of middle age, she was tensely determined to get a fresh start before it was too late, to improvise a role that would carry her to the final curtain.

Despite her resolution to let the public know all, H.P.B. was always reticent about the winter of 1873-4 and the humiliations of extreme poverty. For a proud woman with her arrogant background, she accepted hardship in an admirably democratic spirit. Later she was chary of talking about it, torn between pride in obstacles overcome and fear of detracting from the messianic tradition that soon became an obsession.

In spite of the anonymity of landing in New York from the steerage, Madame Blavatsky established contact with

## LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

the New York press within a few days of her arrival. She probably sent in the original tip herself, and Anna Ballard, a pioneer woman reporter from the New York *Sun*, was assigned by her city editor to write a story about women in Russia. Somehow, Miss Ballard encountered H.P.B., and the *Sun* solemnly reported that a colony of one hundred and fifty girls from the Russian aristocracy, including the Czar's own daughters, had been studying medicine in Zurich when the Czar issued a ukase forbidding Russian women to study medicine and limiting them to the practice of midwifery. The Russian Consul in Switzerland immediately broke up the Zurich group. Some returned to "their stern motherland," others drifted to Paris and Germany; "a small but precious heaven turned to America . . . interesting women and an honor to any country." The story and the number mentioned are fantastic and would be incredible even today. It was a Blavatskyan fantasy, its purpose appearing in the final sentence: "These accomplished women, polyglots, artists, travellers, scientists, nearly moneyless are able to do much and want something to do."<sup>1</sup> Score one for Madame Blavatsky; she had crashed the columns of the New York *Sun* and put a want ad in the reading matter free of charge.

Twenty years later, the aging Miss Ballard found her way to India and settled down at the world headquarters of Theosophy in Adyar. H.P.B. was dead, but Colonel Olcott was still collecting references and he asked Miss Ballard to write him a letter about that long-ago assignment. She had forgotten the subject of the interview and, being in India, could not look up the files. But she vividly remembered Madame's saying exultantly, "I have been in Tibet." The fact is that H.P.B. did not begin to talk about Tibet until several years later. In 1873 the emphasis was all on Egypt, spending three nights in the Pyramids, caravan trips across the desert. H.P.B. went so far as to appropriate India's classic myth, the rope trick, and give an eye-witness account

<sup>1</sup> *New York Sun*, July 28, 1873.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

of seeing it performed, not in India but in Egypt at the feast of Ramadan. Elderly Miss Ballard, who had forgotten even the subject of her interview, was unlikely to have remembered a chance remark about Tibet. But a guest wanting to make herself agreeable may, in comparatively good faith, succumb to suggestion. Miss Ballard's happening to recall the remark that her host most wanted illustrates the fragility of truth and the snares that beset the unwary as they venture upon the uncharted seas of occultism.

Immigrants were pouring into the United States at the rate of half a million a year in the 1870's, creating as a by-product numerous agencies offering them assistance. On arrival, H.P.B. was directed to a Home for Working Women at 222 Madison Street on the lower east side, one of New York's earliest tenement houses. The Home was organized as a co-operative, and the sixty-five occupants, chiefly unskilled labor, held weekly meetings attended by the landlord, Mr. Rinaldo, and by the philanthropic founder, Miss Sue Smith of Virginia, who had made up a \$1,200 deficit during the preceding year.

Mr. Rinaldo introduced H.P.B. to the owners of a shirt-and-collar factory, to whom she submitted some humorous advertising sketches drawn on playing cards, incorporating the pips into her cartoons. She also made exotic designs for leather work and novelties. But this woman whose genius as a salesman of invisible Mahatmas made her famous had no gift for selling material things. It was Odessa over again. The weeks went by, and H.P.B., penniless, lingered on among these humble working women. She told Miss Smith that she had sent home for money and expected to hear from the Russian Consul. Arguments about H.P.B. divided the Home into two parties: those backing the Russian Countess against those convinced that she was an adventuress.

In addition to the charwomen, the Home had its small white-collar aristocracy. A young school teacher, Elizabeth

## LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

G. J. Holt, has left a simple, honest account of her famous neighbor.<sup>2</sup> She remembered Madame at forty-two as an unusual and powerful-looking woman, probably taller than she appeared because she was so heavy, with broad face and shoulders and lightish brown hair "crinkled like a negro's." Around her neck she wore a freakish tobacco pouch, the mounted head of an animal in which she fumbled for tobacco to roll her perpetual cigarettes. In view of the time and place, H.P.B.'s cigarettes serve as a tribute to the tolerance of Miss Sue Smith of Virginia.

In the evening Miss Holt and her friend Miss Parker and their little set gathered around H.P.B. and listened to her stories. She leaned toward the macabre, death and graveyards, premature burials, morbid marvels; she was on intimate terms with the spirits, mischievous and often wicked little creatures, *diaki* she called them. Romantic Elizabeth liked best to hear about her adventures with kings and queens, and how wearing trousers and a smock, she had decorated the private apartments of the Empress Eugénie in the Tuileries, climbing up and down ladders with palette and brushes, covering the boudoir walls with jungle scenes, orang-outangs, and boa constrictors. On Sunday evenings H.P.B. held séances, repeating the marvels that had held the aristocracy of Pskov and Tiflis spellbound. To Elizabeth's chagrin, she was not allowed to attend these affairs; Miss Parker thought she was too young and that her mother would not approve. Even Miss Parker found the meetings so spooky that afterward she used to stay all night with Elizabeth rather than climb two dark flights of stairs to her own room. Miss Holt's general impression of H.P.B. was favorable and mystified. She remembered that when the younger residents wanted advice they were likely to turn to Madame, who transfixed them with her strange, beautiful eyes and spread their past lives before them with terrifying accuracy. They liked her unconventionality, her picaresque

<sup>2</sup> *Theosophist*, December 1931.



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

humor, her sympathy with the underdog; they responded to her experience and her courage. But, said Elizabeth primly, she would never have regarded Madame as an ethical teacher. She was too excitable; when things went wrong, she lost her temper, made scenes, and used dreadful words.

The naïveté of Miss Holt's recollections is offset by the cynicism of other impressions of Madame. A second newspaper woman, Mrs. Hannah Shepard Wolff of the New York *Star*, encountered H.P.B. in the Home dormitory. In spite of the drab surroundings and Madame's appearance, fat and careless, lounging on her bed in untidy negligé, Mrs. Wolff recognized the challenge of the woman. She did not surrender to her charm, describing her as a "clever and remorseless adventuress," and attributing her eccentricity to the use of hashish and opium, which she urged upon Mrs. Wolff in vain.

At her father's death H.P.B. received \$500 of her modest inheritance. She ran through the money in a quick splurge at a smart hotel and was soon back in Bohemia, living in a co-operative flat with three journalists, two men and another woman. She continued to devise new types of phenomena: ordinary photographs left in a certain wooden box in the parlor overnight were found tinted in watercolors by the spirits. One night her housemates, sceptical of her powers, hid behind the portieres; sure enough, after the house was quiet they saw Madame tiptoe out of her room in her nightdress, carrying a lamp and colors and brushes, and they watched while she helped the spirits to color the pictures. Mrs. Wolff collected a number of stories about H.P.B., all involving petty frauds. These received wide publicity later on, for Madame with her arrogant and unconventional ways made enemies as well as friends.<sup>8</sup>

Madame showed her courage that winter of 1873-4, even taking a job in a sweatshop making artificial flowers. She was

<sup>8</sup> *Two Worlds*, October-December 1881; also, *The Better Way*, 1880; *Carrier Dove*, 1880; *New York Star* and *Religio-Philosophical Journal*, *passim*.

## LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

struggling to get a fingerhold at a higher level to avoid being swept down into the vortex of the Melting Pot's anonymous millions. She moved frequently, accepting hospitality as it was offered. After a brief stay in Brooklyn with some Russians she had met on shipboard, she was taken back to Manhattan by a French Canadian widow, Madame Magnon, her former neighbor at the Home, who now had a little flat on Henry street. One morning after waiting a reasonable time for H.P.B. to come to breakfast, Madame Magnon went to her room and found her gagged and bound, her nightgown sewn to the mattress so securely that her hostess had to cut her loose with scissors. The prank was the work, H.P.B. explained, of the *diaki*, evil spirits who had fastened her down while she was asleep. Madame Magnon was thrilled. It was one way of paying for breakfast.

Nothing is more difficult to imitate than thrift if you are not the thrifty type. Helena tried to hold on to the final instalment of her father's money, but it burned a hole in her pocket and she soon found a marvellous opportunity to provide for the rest of her life. In June 1874 she met Clementine Jerebko and her husband, lately arrived from the Caucasus. Jerebko had been the captain of a yacht belonging to Prince Vorontzov, whom Helena had known in Odessa; the wife, Clementine, came from Helena's old home, Tiflis. The Jerebkos had bought six acres at Northport, half way down the north shore of Long Island, and Clementine drew an idyllic picture of life on the farm. They had paid only \$1,000 for the place and they were sure of an income of at least \$2,000 a year. This time the Siren succumbed to siren voices. On June 22, 1874, Helena paid the Jerebkos \$1,000 and signed a three year co-partnership agreement to work the farm on equal shares, dividing equally all profits and expenses. On July 1, she gave up her struggle with the big city and took possession of her share of the new home in the country.

Of course it could not work. Helena's memories of life

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

on Russian landed estates with scores of serfs at her call were poor preparation for a crude truck farm where she must wait on herself and help with the chores. By the end of the first month, both sides realized that it was a terrible mistake. Clementine prayed to be released from the contract and promised to return the cash. They agreed to sell the land at auction, and together moved back to furnished rooms in the city. Three days later the Jerebkos disappeared. Helena pursued them, persuaded an excellent law firm to represent her and took the case into court.<sup>4</sup> So ended Helena Blavatsky's first year in the Land of Opportunity. Her father was dead. She had squandered her patrimony. Her last financial resource was gone. She was one year older, turned forty-three. She had no time to spare.

### 2. AMERICAN DEBUT

(1874-5)

Ten days after the first of Olcott's articles on the Eddy séances appeared in New York, on October 14, 1874, Madame Blavatsky arrived at the remote Vermont farm. She introduced herself as a spiritualist who had devoted her life for more than fifteen years to defending the cult and its mediums from unjust charges of fraud; she had left an easy life "amongst a civilized society" to become a wanderer on the face of the earth "for the sake of the blessed truths of spiritualism."<sup>5</sup>

Closer scrutiny of H.P.B.'s visit to Chittenden, Vermont, reveals clues that fit into a quite different pattern. Counting on the co-operation of these unknown mediums, the Eddys, she laid elaborate plans to exploit the séances as a setting for her American debut. Her scarlet Garibaldi shirt, out of keeping with her usual style of dress, insured her being noticed. The pantomime of where-to-light-my-cigarette broke the ice for conversation with the Colonel. Her own remarks,

<sup>4</sup> *Theosophist*, April 1923.

<sup>5</sup> *Spiritual Scientist*, December 3, 1874.

## LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

her fulsome flattery about his *Graphic* articles, her artless fear of meeting him, her pretense that she did not recognize him, proved that it was Olcott rather than the Eddys whom she had come to see. The Colonel did not have a chance. In no time he was "Maloney" and she was "Jack," and she was showing him her battle scars.

Expert at winning men's confidence, H.P.B. encouraged Olcott to talk and listened attentively; he was a new type, different from the men of her globe-trotting past. A year younger than H.P.B., Olcott had grown up on his father's New Jersey farm. At twenty-six, he was associate agricultural editor of the New York *Tribune*, which sent him abroad to survey European farming methods. In 1860 he married Mary Epplee Morgan, daughter of the rector of Trinity parish, New Rochelle; they had three sons. After Civil War service in Burnside's North Carolina campaign, he was appointed commissioner with brevet of Colonel and earned commendation for uncovering corruption in arsenals and navy yards. Since the war, he had been admitted to the bar and had opened a law office in New York. He maintained his newspaper contacts with an occasional front-page story, such as the hanging of John Brown, but specialized on two hobbies, farming and spiritualism. He had recently published a genealogy that traced his family back to Thomas Olcott, one of the founders of Hartford, Connecticut, in 1636.<sup>6</sup>

Olcott was an old-fashioned provincial Yankee, honest and capable within limitations; he had initiative, energy, idealism, sentiment, and a gift for convincing people of his own integrity. He could dash off appreciations of the Eddys' tawdry tricks without straining himself because he had the will-to-believe. This made him extremely useful to a clever person like Madame. She argued that Olcott's experience as an investigator of graft fitted him to pass on supernatural phenomena. Mystical fraud involves subtler values than

<sup>6</sup> Henry Steel Olcott: *Descendants of Thomas Olcott*.

### PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

mere embezzlement. Many distinguished men have stubbed their toes on this fact. H.P.B. proved a poor judge of people, but her choice of Olcott as her partner in founding Theosophy was an inspired streak of luck.

For more than a year Madame had marked time, trying to forget the feeling of insecurity and suspense, like a stone in the pit of her stomach. She was not wasting a minute; indefatigably she followed up every lead. By chance a glimpse of the variety of her efforts during a single week has sifted down out of the cobwebbed obscurity of the past. Repercussions of the letters written in that week lead far afield. But they give a sense of the desperate intensity of her mood.

#### 3. THREE LETTERS

( 1874 )

On H.P.B.'s return from Vermont to New York she took a furnished room at 23 Irving Place; across the street from Olcott's Lotos Club, it would be convenient. The next day she called upon Andrew Jackson Davis, who, beginning as a cobbler's apprentice in Poughkeepsie, had acquired an international reputation as a Sage of Spiritualism. She wanted to quiz him about his friend, the Honorable A. N. Aksakov, Imperial Privy Councillor and ardent propagandist for spiritualism. Proscription of the cult by the Russian State Church prevented the use of the Russian press, but Davis told her that Aksakov had recently opened an office in Leipzig and founded a magazine, *Psychische Studien*; he had also financed the translation of Davis's books into German. As she listened, Helena's mind raced ahead . . . American correspondent for the new magazine . . . special articles . . . translate Olcott's new book. For they had already found a publisher for the Eddy articles.

That very day, October 28, 1874, Helena wrote a long letter to Saint Petersburg. Her sentiment for any Russian

## LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

gave her letters to Aksakov poignance and a kind of sincerity, but did not curb her imagination. She described the growth of spiritualism in America with reckless hyperbole, eighteen million converts, the American press greedy for articles. She was on the staff of the *Graphic* and had just returned from two weeks reporting the Eddy séances. Couldn't she send him translations of her *Graphic* articles regularly, illustrated in pen and ink? Would he be interested in her translation of Dickens's unfinished novel *Edwin Drood*, with the sequel written under spirit control?

Before Aksakov could receive her letter, Helena followed it with a second that is one of the most revealing documents in all the hundreds of thousands of words of fact and fiction she left behind her. She had again called on Andrew Jackson Davis, who had just received a letter from Aksakov. As Davis did not understand French, he asked Madame to translate it for him. What was her horror to find Monsieur telling Davis that he had heard about Madame Blavatsky from her family, who said that she was a powerful medium, but that unfortunately her spirit communications showed the effects of her mode of life, which had not been entirely proper ("*qui n'a pas été des plus sévères*").

With a gulp, she abridged and smoothed over her translation. Then she went straight home and wrote to Aksakov:

*Whoever it was told you about me, they told you the truth, in essence if not in detail. God only knows how I have suffered for my past. It is clearly my fate to gain no absolution upon earth. This past, like the brand of the curse on Cain has pursued me all my life and pursues me even here in America where I came to be far from it and from the people who knew me in my youth. You are the innocent cause of my being obliged to escape somewhere yet farther away—where I do not know. I do not accuse you; God is my witness that while I am writing these lines, I have nothing against you in my heart beyond the deep sorrow which I long have known for the irrevocable past.<sup>7</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> Vsevolod, S. Solovyoff: *A Modern Priestess of Isis*, pp. 228–30. (Hereafter referred to in the notes as Solovyoff: *M.P.I.*)

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

It was exasperating to have to confess the sins of her youth to this man whom she was so eager to impress. Before finishing the letter, she managed to turn the tables and forgive him for the pain he had caused her. She continued with a panegyric about spiritualism, to which she had consecrated every moment of her life for the past ten years. She had been claiming fifteen years, but that overlapped the Youry episode, so she cut it to ten. She told Aksakov that she had been a materialist until she was thirty, believing neither in God nor in a future life, hating society because of its hypocrisy. "Ergo, I ran amuck against society and the established proprieties. Result: three lines in your letter which have awakened all the past within me and torn open all the old wounds." If she did experience a change of heart at thirty, it may have been related to her tragic experience with her baby.

Madame was fumbling with inhibitions deeply suppressed, probably connected with her secrecy about her parents, some psychic wound in early life so deep that at seventeen she "ran amuck." She closed the letter with humble appeals, first for Aksakov's sympathy, and second not to reveal her shame to Mr. Davis; she had only one hope left in the world, to gain "the respect of the spiritualists of America who despise nothing so much as 'free love.' Can it give you any satisfaction to morally destroy forever a woman who has already been thus destroyed by circumstances?"

Madame offered no excuses, made no claim of slander and persecution, her stock alibis in later years. But time like a river washes away the past. With reckless confidence in this process of erosion, H.P.B. only ten years later was spinning fantastic yarns about persecutions by the Jesuits and adoption of an infant ward. As she had once convinced the other children of the reality of the curling green tidal wave, she convinced these older playmates of the reality of Maltese gangsters and a glass of lemonade. The authenticity of the Aksakov correspondence has not been questioned; in it

## LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

H.P.B. freely admitted the charges against her, "the bitter fruits of my youth which I dedicated to Satan, his pomps, vanities, *enfin*." Yet Theosophists accept Madame's claim of later years that her life was consecrated to mystic devotion and the service of the Masters and that all scandalous rumors were the persecution of *diaki*.

A generous letter from M. Aksakov assured Madame of his discretion. She was in Hartford helping the Colonel read proof on his *People from the Other World*, but she dashed off a tumultuous reply, bubbling with relief and determined to impress the gentleman anyhow. She began in great humility . . . his infinite goodness, . . . he had the right like any honest man to despise her for her sad reputation in the past; her only hope was in the grave, where she would be freed from her "sinful and impure envelope . . . you are so condescending and magnanimous to write to a sinner like myself." In the very next paragraph she wandered off into a fantasy account of his letter's having magically pursued her from city to city without benefit of postoffices. Long and flighty, the letter tumbled from Russian into French and back again, piling up superlatives, improbabilities, impossibilities. Olcott, devotee of spiritualism for twenty years, was transformed into "a furious sceptic" whom she had converted overnight. The editor of the greatest publishing house in America wanted her to write a book and guaranteed a sale of 100,000 copies. Gradually as H.P.B. realized that her letters to M. Aksakov produced no results, the correspondence withered away.

The day after H.P.B. wrote her original letter to Aksakov witnessed the opening of another curious correspondence.

The Colonel's articles about the Eddy séances had to wait while cuts were made of the artist's drawings; his glowing account of the Countess de Blavatsky's arrival did not appear in the *Graphic* until November 27, a month later than the *Sun's*, which used no pictures. On October 29, the *Sun*, misspelling her name, reported with sceptical reserve on



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

Madame Blowtskey's apparitions, including a Michael Guegidse, a Georgian from the Caucasus, a former servant of her aunt, Madame Witte, in Tiflis. He had been killed in a street accident in 1869, and Madame identified him by a string of amber beads on his wrist. The *Sun* reported that Madame Blowtskey asked the spirit to play and sing some Georgian tunes and loudly applauded the performance.

A series of coincidences ensued. Intercity distribution of newspapers was rather uncommon in the 1870's. Yet a Georgian peasant living in Philadelphia, Michael Betanelly, claimed to have read this article in the New York *Sun* on the day it was printed and, on that same day, October 29, made haste to write a long letter inquiring about Madame and her Georgian spirit. This simple peasant, Betanelly, was so familiar with the New York press that he even knew that the *Graphic* correspondent in Chittenden was Colonel Olcott, and he sent his letter of inquiry, not to the *Sun*, but to Olcott, whose account would not appear for another month. Betanelly's letter read:

*Philadelphia, 430 Walnut st., Oct. 29, 1874.*

*Henry S. Olcott, Chittenden, Vt., Eddy's Homestead.*

*Dear Sir: Though I have not the pleasure of your personal acquaintance, I take the liberty of addressing to you a few words, knowing your name from the Daily Graphic correspondence on Eddy's manifestations, which I read with greatest interest.*

*I learn from today's Sun that at Eddy's in the presence of Mme. Blowtskey, Russian lady, a spirit of Michalko Guegidse (very familiar name to me) has materialized in Georgian dress, has spoken Georgian language, danced Lezguinka and sung Georgian National Air.*

*Being myself a native of Georgia, Caucasus, I read these news with greatest astonishment and surprise, and being not a believer in spiritualism, I do not know what to think of these manifestations.*

*I address today a letter to Mrs. Blowtskey, asking some questions about materialized Georgian, and if she left Eddy's, please forward it to her if you know her address.*

*I also earnestly request your corroboration of this astonishing*

## LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

*fact, materialized Georgian, if he really came out from the cabinet in Georgian dress and in your presence. If that occurred in fact, and if anybody will regard it, as usually trickery and humbug, then I will state you this: There are in the United States no other Georgians but three, of whom I am the one and came first to this country three years ago. Two others whom I know came over last year. I know they are not in Vermont now and never been there before; and I know they do not speak English at all. Beside us three, no other man speaks Georgian language in this country, and when I say this, I mean it to be true fact. Hoping you will answer this letter, I remain,*

*your's respectfully,*

*M. C. Betanelly.*

Simple, trusting Olcott was delighted and wrote post haste, wanting to meet the other two Georgians. Betanelly replied:

*. . . unfortunately I kept no correspondence lately with my Georgian friends, but I think they are somewhere in New York or out west, but I know they had no personal acquaintance of persons in Georgia that materialized at Eddy's. I knew Michalko when alive in Kutais . . . he was late serf . . . and employed servant in Col. A. F. Witte's family.*

*I also knew personally late General Faddeyeff, a tall and old gentleman in Tiflis who died several years ago. He occupied one of the highest rank in Tiflis under Government and possessed the Cross of St. Ann, and other merits of honor for his military and civil services.<sup>8</sup>*

These letters raise several questions. With a population of one and a half million Georgians, it pulled the long arm of coincidence that one of the only three Georgians in the United States should promptly identify H.P.B.'s humble serf, Michalko. It pulled it again when Betanelly happened to refer to Madame's grandfather though he did not know Madame, and when he also happened to mention the cross of Saint Anne, which Madame wanted to establish as an important Russian decoration. Betanelly also contradicted himself. First he asserted that the other two Georgians were

<sup>8</sup> Henry Steel Olcott: *People from the Other World*, pp. 305-6.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

not in Vermont and then he claimed not to know where they were. The delay in acknowledging acquaintance with Michalko until the second letter is curious. The later development that Michalko was alive at this time gives a touch of *opéra-bouffe*.

The first of Betanelly's letters began with the phrase with which Madame on the previous day had opened her letter to Aksakov, an apology for "taking the liberty" of addressing a stranger. The style of the letters was naïvely inconsistent. Some sentences scarcely made sense, yet unusual words and idioms abounded: *corroboration*, *astonishment*, *unfortunately*. The writer's familiarity with the jargon of spiritualism was another anachronism, especially as he professed himself not a believer: *cabinet*, *manifestations*, *materialization*.

In spite of its crudity, the letter conveyed just what Madame wanted said: 1. it recapitulated the Georgian phenomena; 2. the writer was not a spiritualist, and hence was disinterested; 3. he did not know Madame, and 4. by chance he happened to mention her grandfather and the cross of St. Anne.

It can scarcely be doubted that Madame had known Betanelly previously, and that the appearance of the spirit of a Georgian serf at Chittenden with subsequent corroboration by a real, live Georgian was carefully planned. None of these considerations occurred to the Colonel. The letters seemed to him perfect corroboration. While making a great show of his scientific investigations, the Colonel was pitifully gullible. He weighed and tape-measured and took notes and left loop holes large enough for mediums to crawl through bodily. The spiritualist press showed itself far more cautious and critical than he.

The third of Madame's three letters in three days had no more relation to the other two than they to each other. On October 30, she plunged into print with an attack upon a prominent New York physician, graduate of Yale and lec-

## LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

turer at the New York Academy of Medicine, Dr. George M. Beard. The Doctor had recently visited Chittenden; he carried a galvanic electric battery by night boat to Albany, across country to Rutland, and seven miles by springless wagon to the Eddy brothers' farmhouse. He had devised a test of their good faith by means of this fascinating new gadget. When the medium took hold of the two handles, the Doctor would turn on sufficient current to prevent his letting go. With the medium's hands glued to the battery during the séance, the Doctor conceded that he would be impressed—if anything happened. He had his trouble for nothing. The Eddys haughtily refused to touch the handles or to submit to any test.

An account of his trip by Dr. Beard in the *Graphic* was factual and discerning. The light in the séance room, when there was any, was so dim that, with perfect eyesight, he was unable to recognize a face at three feet. It was impossible to have identified the numerous spirits mentioned or to have seen the details of the costumes so elaborately described. He expressed mild surprise at Olcott's credulity and told of wanting to discuss with him, while at the farm, certain suspicions of the Eddys. He had closed the door of the room, whereupon the Colonel had told him that it was useless to shut the door as the spirits would hear and report to the Eddys whatever he said. The Doctor courteously made the point that he was convinced of the Colonel's essential honesty, but he was equally convinced that the Eddys were stupendous frauds "as unscrupulous as they were ignorant."<sup>9</sup>

Madame shot her third letter into the air, a surprisingly shrill and ill-tempered attack in which she accused the Doctor of gross and vulgar insults "worthy of a drunken London cockney." With a show of great emotion because it was something too sacred to expose to the vulgar gaze, she again described the spirits' presenting her with the medal-buckle

<sup>9</sup> *New York Graphic*, November 9, 1874.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

unearthed from her father's grave in Stavropol. D. D. Home, among others, entered the subsequent controversy, reminding Helena that she had been using this same trick as far back as 1858 in Paris. Since then he had married into the Russian aristocracy and he now bluntly informed her that it was not customary in Russia to bury an officer's decorations with his body. For confirmation, he published part of a letter from his friend Baron Meyendorff who, he said, had known Madame in the past "to his cost."<sup>10</sup>

When the smoke cleared away, the Eddys had been discredited even by the spiritualist press, and Madame seemed to be responsible for the ghoulish conceit of rifling her father's grave. She continued her quarrelsome attacks on Dr. Beard, Dr. F. R. Marvin, and a little group of professional men who were trying to debunk the fraudulent excesses of spiritualism. Her methods were crude, but they got her name into print.

Using the excuse of personally delivering another letter attacking Dr. Beard, H.P.B. called at the *Graphic* office and contrived to be interviewed. Helena was never beautiful, but she had something that is quite as much fun for a clever woman: she was born attractive to men and she knew it, prized it, and was jealous of other women to her last breath. Even after becoming grossly fat, she was vain enough to drape a scarf around her neck or hold her hand to her face in her photographs so as to hide her double chin.

By the time she was thirty, Helena had gone astonishingly slack. She carried over a seventeenth-century lack of personal fastidiousness into the nineteenth century. She was oblivious to grease spots down the front of her rusty wrappers; her fingernails were rimmed in black; her tapering fingers grimy and stained with nicotine. And yet, far from being really indifferent, she fixed herself up elaborately for public appearances. The trouble was that she had no taste, no eye for color or line, and knew only how to pile on orna-

<sup>10</sup> *Boston Herald*, March 5, 1876.

## LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

ments. Even the bemused Olcott cringed as he felt the laughter of people passing on the street: "A stout and remarkable looking woman, wearing a perky hat with plumes, a *grande toilette* satin dress with much trimming, a long heavy gold chain about her neck attached to a blue enamelled watch, with a monogram in cheap diamonds, and on her lovely hands a dozen or fifteen rings, large and small. . . . I have gone to the theatre with her when I expected the house to rise at us." <sup>11</sup>

She was arrayed in her purplest linen the day she went to the *Graphic* office, wearing her father's buckle, and displaying the crested letters from Baron Meyendorf and Prince Wittgenstein that had dazzled Olcott in Vermont. She was turned over to a staff comedian who wrote with tongue in cheek of her aristocratic connections and her Munchausen adventures. But when he wrote of the lady herself, Helena's charm triumphed over the gewgaws and crashing colors; the reporter took his tongue out of his cheek and paid her left-handed tribute: "a remarkably good-natured and sprightly woman. She is handsome with a full voluptuous figure, large eyes, well formed nose and rich sensuous mouth and chin." He even said that she was dressed with "remarkable elegance" and that her clothing was redolent of subtle perfumes from the Far East. The interview began with kidding informality:

"Do you fellows smoke here?" she asked abruptly,

"I don't. . . ."

"Oh you mean fellow,"

"But the others do and you can smoke if you wish."

"That's right. All we Russian ladies like our cigarettes. Why do you know that poor Queen Victoria is nearly frightened into fits because her Russian daughter-in-law smokes?"

Here Madame Blavatsky took out a book of cigarette papers and a package of Turkish tobacco and deftly rolled an elegant little cigarette. The writer gallantly supplied her with a light, and she began to smoke, blowing the blue vapor through her beauti-

<sup>11</sup> Olcott: *O.D.L.*, I, 459.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

ful nostrils with that dreamy relish which the smoker knows so well.<sup>12</sup>

The reporter punctuated Madame's remarks with "puff-puffs-at-her-cigarette." He used her fantastic stories about making a fortune in ostrich feathers and losing it at the gaming tables, and he made a climax of her insistence that the Czar was a spiritualist and had freed the serfs in 1866 because of a message from an apparition of his late father! The reporter used the newspaper man's deadly weapon, a serious presentation of Madame talking through her hat. The interview distressed Olcott. He knew that it was not helpful publicity. Madame was less critical. She did not enjoy the disrespect, but she was complacent as she measured the agate inches of print.

<sup>12</sup> *New York Graphic*, November 13, 1874.

## CHAPTER VI



### TRIAL AND ERROR

(1875)

TOWARD the end of 1874, Madame turned her attention to Philadelphia, where she had several prospects, none of them too promising. Two mediums, Mr. and Mrs. Holmes, holding séances in Philadelphia had become headliners through the sponsorship of the wealthy reformer, Robert Dale Owen; recently there had been disagreeable rumors about them, even in the spiritualist press. Reckless Madame Blavatsky, ignorant alike of American moods and of publicity methods, undertook to rehabilitate the Holmeses, incidentally cultivating Mr. Owen. By December first she had abandoned New York and moved in on Philadelphia. The Holmeses reached the apex of polite publicity a fortnight later when "the aristocratic *Atlantic Monthly* opened its doors to Mr. Owen" for an article on spiritualism with laudatory references to them. But the *Atlantic Monthly* for January 1875 had gone to press many weeks earlier. A cruel fate arranged that Owen should publicly repudiate the Holmeses on the very day that the *Atlantic* appeared on the newsstands. Faced with a last moment revelation of the Holmes' elaborate frauds, Owen had tried to stop distribution of the magazine by telegraph, but he was too late. Hu-



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

miliated, he hastened to announce through the press that he had been grossly deceived for several years, and he apologized for having unwittingly helped these charlatans to impose upon the American public.

Instead of discreetly retreating before this development, H.P.B. redoubled her efforts. Colonel Olcott was invited by Mrs. Holmes to conduct one of his "scientific investigations," and he arrived in Philadelphia on January 4. When he joined H.P.B. in her boarding house at 1111 Girard Avenue, he was taken aback to discover that it was the home of his correspondent Betanelly. With a wave of her beautiful hands and a gaze of her azure eyes, Madame explained this away, and the two men settled down beside her in triangular harmony.

It was true in 1875 as it is today that to secure publicity you must have a steady flow of startling news or prestige and a committee of big names. By stressing the "scientific" nature of their investigation, Madame actually secured the use of Robert Dale Owen's name for her committee until, a few weeks later, upon his complete mental breakdown, the poor old man was moved into a sanitarium. After the collapse of Owen, Madame's star member was General Francis James Lippitt. Graduated from Brown University in 1830, the year following Madame's birth, the General had had a colorful career, practicing law and serving in both the army and the navy. He was the last survivor of the little delegation that had represented this country at the funeral of Lafayette. In later years he became a lecturer on international law at the Naval War College at Newport. He was one of an exclusive group making an informal investigation of the Holmeses, which included the Vice-President of the United States, Henry Wilson; A. J. Drexel, the banker; and George W. Childs, the publisher. The last two, Madame noted, had recently purchased the Philadelphia *Ledger*.

Madame cultivated General Lippitt with the assurance of a woman who knows the quantity of sugar that an aging

## TRIAL AND ERROR

(63) male heart can assimilate. She wrote almost daily notes to "My Sweet General"; John King, the popular spirit control, showered attentions upon him. John and his daughter Katie King dominated both Madame's and the Holmeses' séances. The Kings stand out in that strange galaxy of spirits which have had their brief vogue in the séance rooms of the world. John is supposed to have begun as The King, a generic title. A later legend identified him as the spirit of Sir Henry Morgan, the pirate. Madame said she had known him intimately for fourteen years, that not a day passed but he was with her. Daughter Katie was to fascinate several generations of mediums. It was Katie who, working through the pretty young medium Florence Cook, threw dust in the eyes of the eminent scientists Alfred Russel Wallace and Sir William Crookes. A generation later Katie King floated back into the limelight as the control of the celebrated medium, Eusapia Palladino.

Katie had been the Holmeses' favorite control. For months she had carried on an innocent flirtation with Mr. Owen until the old man was loading her with jewelry, which the immaterial Kate had no difficulty in carrying out of the séance room, and which finally led to the Holmes' undoing. A fortnight after Owen's repudiation of the Holmeses, the Philadelphia *Inquirer* devoted half a dozen full newspaper pages to Katie's biography.<sup>1</sup> It was a sensational exposure of a young woman who, month after month, had been smuggled into the séance room to impersonate Katie in flesh and blood. The reputable spiritualist weeklies, long uneasy, hastened to repudiate the Holmeses and to criticize "those," meaning H.P.B. and Olcott, who by defending them against the weight of evidence, invited suspicion of all mediums and of spiritualism itself.

Obstinately Madame bombarded the press with screeds, verbose and violent, on behalf of the Holmeses. When she could no longer get anything published, she fell back on

<sup>1</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 9 and 11, 1875.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

General Lippitt, whose training in international law was no defense against her glamour. Although a month had passed since the *Inquirer's* splashing *exposé*, the General obediently signed his name to Olcott's long-winded whitewash of the Holmeses. He thereby secured its publication in the *Religio-Philosophical Journal*. The editor of this conservative spiritualist weekly felt obliged to recognize the Lippitt name, but in the same issue he commented bitterly on the humiliation of watching "a small number professing spiritualism hover round the dead carcass of the Katie King humbug."<sup>2</sup> The report was tiresome reading. John King had whispered a message in Georgian to Betanelly. John King had told the Colonel: "I'll take care of your boy Morgan," and the Colonel had been overcome that John should know his son's name. John King asked the Colonel for his signet ring, which he reluctantly handed over and that night, back at 1111 Girard Avenue, Olcott was relieved and amazed to find the ring under his pillow.

Secretly, Madame was as sick of the Holmeses as the spiritualist press; she admitted as much to Lippitt: "Fraud is their nature . . . they must have been conceived in some moment of cheating or humbug as Mr. Sterne in his *Voyage Sentimentale* . . . I have never believed them. I believe my eyes, my senses and John [King]." Years later Mrs. Holmes confessed the whole elaborate machinery of deception to a committee that included Richard Brodhead Westbrook, D.D., LL.D., one of the early Councillors of the Theosophical Society. Mrs. Holmes said that Madame Blavatsky had proposed a partnership in a touring spiritualistic show, taking the Colonel along as business manager; Madame had boasted that she could make the Colonel do anything she wanted, she had him "so psychologized that he did not know his head from his heels."<sup>3</sup> Madame's scrapbooks confirmed the charge of collusion with the Holmeses.

<sup>2</sup> *Religio-Philosophical Journal*, February 20, 1875.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, September 16, 1893.

## TRIAL AND ERROR

Over a clipping, "Mrs. Holmes Caught Cheating," H.P.B. wrote:

*She swore to me in Philadelphia that if I only saved her that once, she would never resort to cheating and trickery again. I saved her, but upon receiving her solemn oath. And now she went out of greed for money to produce her bogus manifestations again. . . . Let her receive her fate, the vile, fraudulent liar.*

H.P.B.<sup>4</sup>

This episode was typical of many sordid lost causes that Madame championed throughout her career to the despair of her disciples.

Now that the Holmes' defense had collapsed, Madame failed to return to her rooms near the Lotos Club. Something detained her in Philadelphia, but she kept in touch with the Colonel by letter. She had a new device for holding his interest: he was to be the big chief of a mystifying Miracle Club. The select membership would be forbidden to mention so much as the place of meeting; mediums and sorcerers would perform in superlative secrecy. It was in reality just another séance circle with fancy trimmings and a hush-hush atmosphere. The secrecy had practical advantages. It appealed to certain types of people; if things went wrong and the miracles failed to jell, only those in an elite inner circle would know, and they could be kept under control. If anyone talked, he was at once discredited; he had broken his vow. It was a clever idea, but Olcott made little headway. He lacked the magic touch. He needed H.P.B.'s presence, her gift of repartee, her weird stories, the green sea waves transmuted into a supernatural cosmos, her gift for making the unreal more vivid and more important than the real.

Madame also found time for frequent letters to General Lippitt. Perhaps to offset the Holmes fiasco, John King volunteered to make a portrait of himself for the General. In

<sup>4</sup> Mary K. Neff: *Personal Memoirs of H. P. Blavatsky*, p. 213.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

india ink on white satin he drew a stereotyped male face with regular features, framed in a black beard and white turban and turned the picture over to H.P.B. for her to finish. She rested John's arm on a balustrade, gave him a furry-looking laurel wreath, and asked the General not to mention her helping with the picture because she did not want to be considered a medium, "which title is synonymous to fraud in our days." This was a new note of disillusionment and gave warning of an important change of program.

While Madame composed her letter about the King picture, Betanelly was also writing to the General; both letters were dated March 22, 1875 and were written on Betanelly's letterhead, which described him as an importer of Russian insect exterminators, goat skins, tobacco. Madame had passed the hat among her men friends on behalf of her young protégé, and Betanelly was thanking the General for "helping our business." He went on to report the latest adventures of H.P.B. and John King. That very afternoon he had forgotten to deliver a letter to Madame "and when we were sitting at the dinner table" John had rapped and made a fuss, abusing Betanelly for his poor memory. "Since we came to this house . . ." wrote Betanelly, and divulged further wonders. The letter sounded unmistakably domestic. It was a new kind of triangle, with John King in and out at all hours, having his own desk piled with papers, and making a terrible scene if anyone touched them.

A fortnight later, on April 3, Madame wrote the General that she had that day finished John's picture and shipped it by express; the letter is of unusual interest because it was written on her wedding day. On April 3, Madame Blavatsky and Michael Betanelly were married by a Unitarian minister, the Reverend William H. Furness. Of all Helena Hahn's madcap pranks, this marriage to a peasant with no money and no prospects probably heads the list. She had now, if not earlier, become a bigamist. Paradoxically, she

## TRIAL AND ERROR

reversed the disparity-of-age theme by marrying a man almost as much her junior as she had been younger than General Blavatsky.

General Lippitt demonstrated his docility by giving the press H.P.B.'s explanation of the marriage over his signature: when Betanelly proposed to her, she saw that he was impelled by dark denizens on the other side of the line to commit suicide if she refused. In the first flush of her youth and beauty two men had committed suicide because of hopeless love for her and, fearing lest a third be added to the list, she had accepted Betanelly on condition that she was never to see him again after the ceremony. When he became an importunate lover, she repulsed him and he obtained a divorce.<sup>5</sup> D. D. Home, looking on scornfully, quoted Betanelly's attorney, Joshua Pusey, and charged that a horrible tale of diabolism was connected with the marriage.

Because the wedding had been delayed for several weeks after they moved into the Sansom Street house and it was apparent that they had been living together, Madame tried to erase the date from the record. Her apologists argue that she must have been married before March 22, because of Betanelly's letter. (See Appendix C, page 320.) But the records in the Philadelphia City Hall show the date as April 3. It was a matter-of-fact wedding day. Madame did not let it interfere with finishing and shipping the white satin portrait. Perhaps the bride and groom stopped at the express office on their way to the Pine Street parsonage.

The question as to the status of Madame's ménage before the marriage is complicated by the fact that Colonel Olcott was a guest in their home at the time, though not present at the ceremony. "I saw them when they returned from the clergyman's residence after the celebration of the rite," wrote the Colonel.<sup>6</sup> When he remonstrated with H.P.B. over the folly of her marrying a man so much

<sup>5</sup> *Religio-Philosophical Journal*, April 1888.

<sup>6</sup> Olcott: *O.D.L.*, I, p. 57.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

younger and so "inexpressibly her inferior in mental capacity," she silenced him with the suicide story. In time, she improvised a more complicated defense; her fate and Betanely's were "temporarily linked together by an inexorable Karma, and the union was to her in the nature of a punishment for her awful pride and combativeness which impeded her spiritual evolution, while no lasting harm would result to the young man."

It was a thin sugar-coating for a very bitter pill. But the Colonel swallowed it.

### 2. TOMORROW THERE WILL BE NOTHING TO EAT

(1875)

The first six months of 1875 were the turning point of Madame Blavatsky's career. Iconoclasts had pricked the beautiful, iridescent bubble of spiritualism. The cult on which she had built her plans for a comeback was in a temporary state of collapse. Now she must begin all over again. Whatever our reservations about her methods, her tempers, her treatment of her associates, she deserves recognition for her courage and ingenuity. She transformed the stalemate of spiritualism into a steppingstone to the front row of the cultist's Hall of Fame. She had expected to electrify the American public with the array of fancy-dress spirits that greeted her arrival at the Eddy farm. The display of such power must surely establish her in a secure position. Corroboration of her Georgian spirit, Michalko, by the real, live Georgian, Betanely, must convince the most skeptical. Yet somehow, it had not even been a nine-day wonder. Madame had overestimated the pulling power of a writeup in the *Graphic*. She received a few fan-mail letters, and that was all. She was out her expenses for the trip to Chittenden.

Again, it was Monsieur Aksakov to whom H.P.B. disclosed the bitter truth, garnished with fiction. Writing to him early in 1875 she drew a gloomy picture of the demor-

## TRIAL AND ERROR

alization of the spiritualists and admitted the failure of the Miracle Club. Olcott's book about the Eddy séances had not sold 1,000 copies in five months, and he was "sitting on heaps of his *People from the Other World* like Marius on the ruins of Carthage, and thinking bitter things." During the past year, she had earned \$6,000 by her writings but had spent it all in trying to salvage spiritualism, and was now penniless. The statement of her earnings was, of course, fantastic. During her five years in this country, she sold two stories to the *New York Sun*, for each of which she may have received \$10. She wrote a few travel articles for the Russian press; her earnings from the spiritualist press were negligible. Her inheritance from her father probably amounted to less than \$3,000. For the rest, Olcott paid the bills. She could not admit all of this to Aksakov, but she made one frank statement:

*Here you see is my trouble, tomorrow there will be nothing to eat. Something quite out of the way must be invented. It is doubtful if Olcott's Miracle Club will help . . . I am ready to sell my soul for spiritualism but nobody will buy it, and I am living from hand to mouth and working for ten or fifteen dollars when necessity comes.<sup>†</sup>*

Madame's letters were slanted to create three impressions: of her burning ardor for spiritualism and her importance as a leader of the movement; of her great literary success in the United States, and of her desperate need for literary work. Reconciling the last two themes was a problem, but Madame was skilful. In public, she continued to defend spiritualism for another six months, but private letters showed her secretly at work transplanting her efforts from the ordinary garden cult to a hothouse hybrid already germinating under the glow of her inspiration.

The next move was novel, daring, spectacular. H.P.B. conceived the Theosophical Society, though it may have been mere opportunism. She did not propose to surrender the

<sup>†</sup> Solovyoff: *M.P.I.*, p. 253.



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

Colonel as the price of her dalliance with Betanelly. The "something quite out of the way" materialized on March 9, 1875, a date that, though unobserved by Theosophists, is really their basic anniversary. On this day Tuitit Bey, Grand . . of the Brotherhood of Luxor, wrote his first letter to Colonel Olcott. The Egyptian setting and names were to be permanently replaced by Indian scenery and personnel, but it was the Egyptian Brotherhood who succeeded John King and created the role of first member of Madame's supernatural hierarchy. This letter to Olcott was first in the long series of Mahatma letters that constitute an important part of Theosophical scriptures.

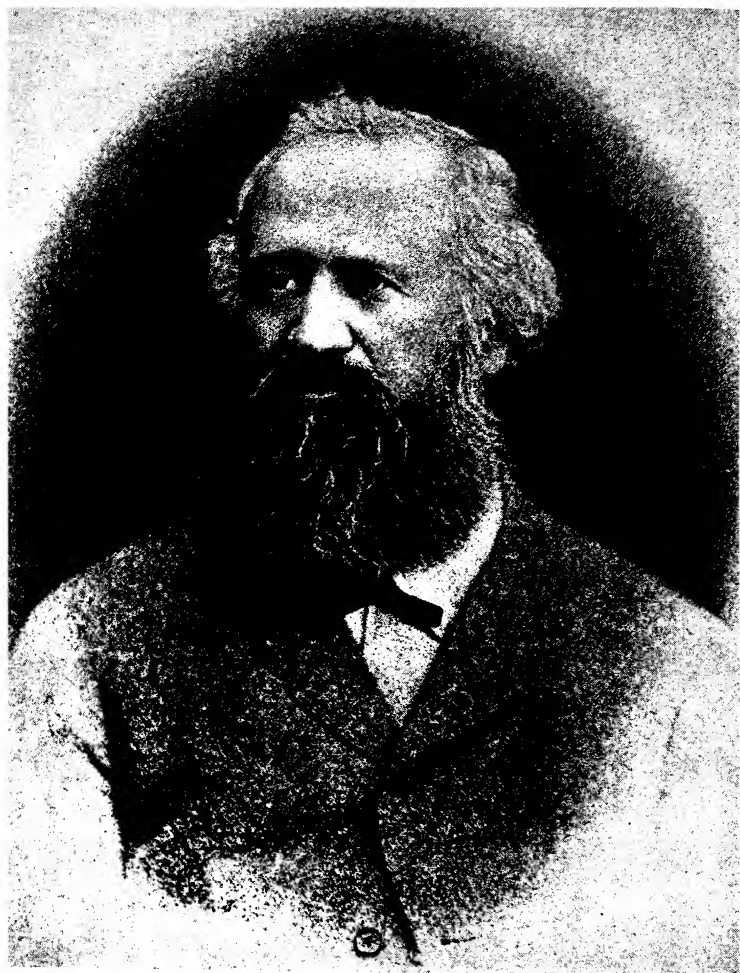
Assembled in their Observatory in ancient Egypt shortly after midnight, the Brotherhood of Luxor dictated their message. H.P.B. delayed its delivery for a few hours because she wanted permission to transcribe it to a magic parchment on which the letters appeared while you read them and disappeared as soon as you had finished. The Chief told her not to bother, but to hurry the letter along. And so, instead of a magic parchment, it was written on thick green stationery in gold ink and enclosed in a black glazed envelope fastened with a large red notary's seal. It was addressed in French, "*aux bons soins de Mme. Blavatsky, F.G.S., . . R+*": <sup>8</sup>

*From the Brotherhood of Luxor, Section the Vth to Henry S. Olcott.*

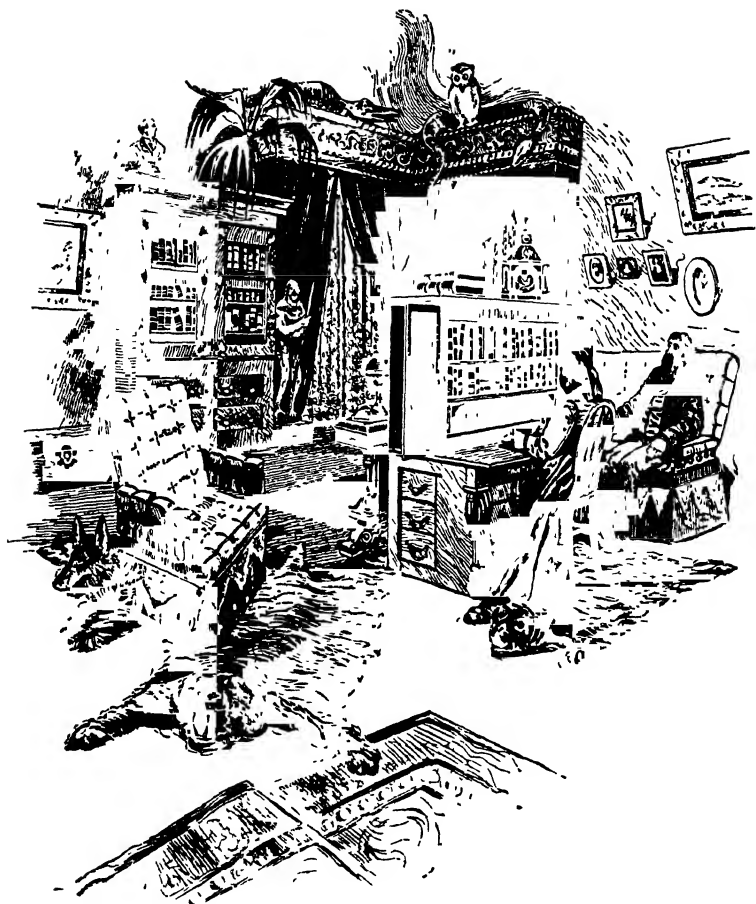
*Brother Neophyte, we greet Thee.*

*He who seeks us finds us. TRY. Rest thy mind—banish all foul doubt. We keep watch over our faithful soldiers. Sister Helen is a valiant, trustworthy servant. Open thy spirit to conviction, have faith and she will lead thee to the Golden Gate of truth. She neither fears sword nor fire but her soul is sensitive to dishonor and she hath reason to mistrust the future. Our good brother "John" hath verily acted rashly but he meant well. Son of the world, if thou dost hear them both, TRY . . . Thou hast many good mediums around thee, don't give up thy club. TRY. Brother John hath brought three of our Masters to look at thee after the*

<sup>8</sup> *Theosophist*, April 1922.



*Alexander Nikolayevich Aksakov, Imperial Privy Councillor*



*Salon in the Lamasery, where anything could happen  
(New York)*

## TRIAL AND ERROR

*seance. Thy noble exertions on behalf of our cause now give us the right of letting thee know who they were:*

SERAPIS BEY (*Ellora Section*)

POLYDORUS ISURENUS (*Section of Solomon*)

ROBERT MORE (*Section of Zoroaster*)

*Sister Helen will explain thee the meaning of the Star and colors. Activity and Silence as to the present.*

*By order of the Grand . . .*

TUTTIT BEY

*Observatory of Luxor,*

*Tuesday morning,*

*Day of Mars.*

For a first letter breaking centuries of silence between gods and men it is a disappointing combination of Spenserian elegance, archaic English, cabalistic symbols, and amateurishness. It might be Aunt Prudence exhorting her nephew not to be discouraged because the Miracle Club's first medium had been a failure. John King was in disgrace, but H.P.B. was considering his reinstatement. In a covering letter, H.P.B. offered Olcott the privilege of becoming a Neophyte, but warned him that if he accepted there could be no backing out; he would have to undergo severe trials and temptations: "If you . . . agree to the word Neophyte you are cooked my boy and there is no return from it . . . Patience, faith, no questioning, thorough obedience and Silence." Her final sentence is noteworthy. It was a statement in the very first letter of Theosophy's basic principle of blind obedience to the occultist leader. This autocratic principle, guarded by the secrecy of the E. S. (Esoteric Section) has been responsible for Theosophy's worst abuses, but it has also furnished the vitality and authority to keep the Society alive through the most sordid scandals.

In devising this supernatural hierarchy with herself as sole intermediary for all mankind, Madame showed daring and shrewdness. She was building herself a political machine with almost unlimited leverage. The hierarchy gave her all the advantages of a business partnership with none

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

of its drawbacks. When she wanted to gain time before giving an answer, she must consult her partners. They took the blame for unpopular and unreasonable decisions and for mistakes that were never her fault, but were by their order. No matter what went wrong, she could always shift the blame. She did not even have to pay the price of splitting profits. She was the sole authority, responsible to no one, an autocrat in her esoteric realm. With credulous people like Olcott, the Brotherhood enhanced her authority. Had it been Madame alone who wanted five hundred dollars to keep the *Spiritual Scientist* alive, her neophytes could have looked sympathetic and said, Sorry, we just do not have it. But when an Unknown God endorsed her signing a note for five hundred dollars and ordered Olcott to get the money, Olcott did as he was told until his credit was exhausted.

At this time, H.P.B. invented a number of devices that became standard practise under Theosophy. She built up her own authority by means of extravagant praise put in the mouth of these all-wise Masters. "Sister Helen is a valiant, trustworthy servant," wrote Tuitit Bey, and they never ceased to reiterate her power, her unselfishness, her high rank as an occultist, the severity of her tests, the persecution she had endured. The Brothers' style became ever more involved, and they borrowed liberally. "The Dweller," dread figure from Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* stalked across their pages; rituals of the Rosicrucians, Kabbalists, Freemasons and other secret orders gave them words and symbols: TRY, thee, thou, dost, hath, and other archaisms; use of initials, dashes, asterisks, fancy writing papers, and exotic inks.

The title Neophyte proved irresistible, and in spite of H.P.B.'s warning, Olcott accepted it and was received into fellowship. The august Brother Serapis wrote apologizing for the delay in the delivery of the first letter: it had been held up by the feminine weakness of our sister Helena who

## TRIAL AND ERROR

was so curious that she had made an excuse to open and read it. "We forgive her for she suffers intensely." This was a double header. It proved that H.P.B. could not have written the letter or why would she be so curious to read it? It also elevated Olcott to the dizzy eminence of association with the Brothers in condoning the Sister's faults. Serapis blandly continued: our Sister was mailing Olcott an obligation for five hundred dollars; would he kindly find the money! Our Sister stood on the brink of a supreme crisis; once more she must face the dreaded one whom she had thought she would behold no more. . . . The Dweller was watching her closely; all would be lost if her courage failed. She must either conquer this supreme test, or die, herself. "Pray for our Sister, she deserves it." The Brothers leaned heavily on appeals to the chivalry of a strong man for a weak and helpless woman, well aware that Olcott's weakness made him the more anxious to appear strong.

All that springtime honeymoon Madame in her humble West Philadelphia home defended spiritualism, promoted the Miracle Club, played along with fizzling air castles and worked like a beaver on her grandiose new project, the Egyptian Brotherhood of Luxor, with which she hoped to displace spiritualism.

Her first overt step was to get rid of that eminent spirit, John King. He had held a privileged position, having known her in daily intimacy for fourteen years and having saved her life three times: at the battle of Mentana, in a shipwreck, and the last time near Spezzia when her steamer was blown to atoms. She carried on a near-flirtation with King, reporting his amorous rages and putting herself in coquetishly compromising positions. She was his Ellie Uglie, and she knew that he loved her. One night she refused to do something he wanted "because I was sick and did not think it right." In his temper he threw at her a bottle of caustic soda that she had locked away in a casket, burning her brow and cheek. Her eyebrow had turned jet black in the morn-

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

ing, but he only laughed and called her a fine Spanish wench. She reported this erotic byplay to her men friends; perhaps it was the pitiful gesture of a woman whose charms had faded, or she may have found it a provocative device. She had also made very practical use of John King in supporting whatever task she had on hand, such as cultivating and flattering Gerry Brown, the editor of a spiritualist weekly in Boston.

Yet now John King must go! He was really a vicious spirit. In June she wrote warning General Lippitt against him; he was ruthless, cruel, spread malicious lies, made mischief between husband and wife, stole everything in the house, even money, forged people's handwriting, was a cruel practical joker, frequently playing dangerous tricks. H.P.B.'s letter bore an endorsement in red pencil by John King himself, inserted by supernatural means after the envelope was sealed. John King's postscripts were another historic First. Red- and blue-penciled notes and comments became a favorite device of the Mahatmas and a source of frauds that seriously menaced the Society after Madame's death. John King's glib chatter was the granddaddy of all the Mahatmic wisdom. On H.P.B.'s arrival in Philadelphia in December 1874, John King began writing innocuous postscripts to Katie King's letters: "I will try to do better tomorrow. J. K." By June he had acquired a swaggering self-confidence and cheekily endorsed H.P.B.'s letter complaining about him to General Lippitt:

*Now what's the use of abusing a poor innocent spirit that way?  
Tell Ellie Uglie General, and write Gerry Brown a love letter,  
for I love the chap and my heart is opened to him. My business,  
isn't it? I say Frankie, isn't she a brick, my lass? A regular foreign  
pop-gun. That's why I love her. Your benevolent*

JOHN KING.

Sounds childish? Not to General Lippitt, authority on international law; not when surcharged with the magic of the woman to whom Romain Rolland, Maurice Maeter-

## TRIAL AND ERROR

linck, and Count Keyserling have paid tribute, whom William Butler Yeats called a female Dr. Johnson, impressive to all men and women who themselves had any richness of nature.

Having set John King rocking on his pedestal, H.P.B. proceeded to undermine spiritualism. The original justification for creating Theosophy centered round H.P.B.'s disgust with mediums and the spirits that controlled them, "ever lying, cheating mediums, miserable instruments of the undeveloped spirits of the lower sphere, the ancient Hades." Not only were most séance messages fraudulent according to H.P.B., but instead of coming from beloved spirits of the deceased they emanated from "shells" or "elementals," depraved spirits, vampires, condemned by sensuality and vicious habits to haunt the earth. Such spirits corrupted the mediums, leading them into fraud and vicious practices. It is not surprising that the spiritualists were infuriated not only by H.P.B.'s attack but by her smug announcement that it was her mission to cleanse the cult of its errors and vicious practices.

After H.P.B. reached India and evolved her Tibetan Mahatmas, it became an obsession with her to prove that she had been their agent since girlhood. Her scrapbooks served this purpose admirably, and she left a score of them, a jumble of press clippings, sketches, pious and impious sentiments. They lent themselves to the insertion of paragraphs and references to the Masters, written in around early clippings. If these comments were assumed to be of the same date as the clippings, H.P.B. would have an easy means of authenticating all her afterthoughts. Theosophists accept and revere these scrapbooks; they are moved by the eternal note of persecution and by H.P.B.'s identification of herself as a martyred Messiah. A favorite paragraph, supposed to have been written during this spring of 1875, read:

*Ordered to begin telling the public the truth about the phenomena and their mediums. And now my martyrdom will begin.*



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

*I shall have all the spiritualists against me, in addition to the Christians and the Sceptics. Thy will, oh M. be done!*

H.P.B.<sup>9</sup>

The M. stands for the Mahatma Morya, who made his first authentic appearance in H.P.B.'s writings after she reached India five or six years later. The paragraph is supposed to explain and justify her somersault from belief in spiritualism to an aggressive antagonism. She was obeying the orders of her Masters. (See Appendix D, page 321.)

During the winter and spring of 1875, H.P.B. took to her bed for two illnesses. The timing of Madame's frequent falls, sprains, and mysterious seizures suggests that she used them to get around awkward situations. She told conflicting stories about the first sickness. A bruise on her knee from falling on a flagstone before she left New York had become infected. But early in February, she confided to General Lippitt that she was sick in bed, having nearly broken her leg by falling under a heavy bed that she was trying to move. Non-domestic H.P.B. moving beds suggests that early February was the date when she and Betanelly left downtown Philadelphia to set up housekeeping in West Philadelphia. Not being ready to tell Olcott about the new ménage, she invented the fall on the sidewalk as a substitute.

The real purpose of the illness was to provide refuge for a woman in the throes of creation. Her mind was awlirl, leaping millions of years into past and future, rearranging the planets, inventing a new supernatural hierarchy for her own immediate use. She wanted solitude, and she made an alleged injury to her leg an excuse to go to bed, to be alone with her grandiose dreams. It probably was also a device to escape from Betanelly. Very soon after her April wedding day, H.P.B. realized her folly and saw Betanelly for the peasant he really was. By the middle of May she had decided that she had paralysis; she went back to bed and sent Betanelly off on a business trip because it irritated her to

<sup>9</sup> Olcott: *O.D.L.*, I, 25.

## TRIAL AND ERROR

have him around. She called in a variety of medical quacks, a clairvoyant, a negro masseur, an electromagnetist, and finally Dr. Seth Pancoast, surgeon and eminent Kabbalist, who said that the leg would have to be amputated. Whereupon H.P.B. cured it by magic: cold-water poultices and a dog, a white pup, laid across the leg at night cured it in forty-eight hours.

A description of the next phase of her illness, written by Betanelly to General Lippitt, suggests that it was an hysterical attack, as she lay in a trance for nearly a week. Poor Betanelly thought she was dead, her pulse and heart seeming to stop for hours together. "People say her spirit travels at such a time, but I don't know nothing of it and simply thought several times all was finished . . . Why Dr. say three times she was dead." Friday she was better and sat up writing letters, but when she failed to hear from Gerry Brown in Boston, "she got mad and felt worse." As always, Betanelly gave the General the latest news about John King. He had been doing strange things, "had materialized his head and kissed her, but, as she does not like being kissed, when she got better she abused him, and they always have fights together, as you remember, for she hates when he kisses her on the lips." John was also mixed up in the recurring financial emergencies and was forever demanding money. Sometimes H.P.B. gave it to him; when she refused, John stole it. Betanelly commented ruefully on the disappearance of several sums. Gifts of money from John King and H.P.B. to Gerry Brown's *Spiritual Scientist* at this same time were doubtless related to Betanelly's losses. This was another historic letter brushed by angel's wings, for John King endorsed it, in blue pencil this time, "TRUE, J. K."

A few weeks more, and H.P.B. knew that she could stand Betanelly no longer. Olcott offered the best means of escape, but a shaky one. The trouble with Olcott was, as she wrote to Aksakov, that he was a married man with a family

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

whom he refused to abandon: "He is far from rich and has nothing to live on but his literary labors, and he has to keep a wife and a whole lot of children." In addition, the Betanelly incident had not been good for his morale. H.P.B. set about Olcott's re-education, telling him that she was leaving Betanelly because he had gone back on his platonic agreement and become an importunate lover.

Serapis of the Egyptian Brotherhood hastened to Madame's assistance, writing Olcott as man to man, in warm-hearted sympathy for their mutual friend. Calling Betanelly a weak and silly wretch, he said that H.P.B. had deliberately tied herself to a man she hated, believing that she could make him give generously to the support of herself and her Sacred Cause for which she stood ready to sacrifice her very heart's blood. But, "her cup of bitterness is full. Be friendly and merciful to her, O Brother." She had discovered that Betanelly was virtually bankrupt. He was also under the malevolent influence of The Dweller and was secretly planning to sail for Russia, leaving her unprovided for and alone. Unless Olcott came to the rescue, H.P.B. was doomed. Serapis himself was prevented from helping her by the laws of his Lodge.

The simple good faith of Betanelly was evident in his letter to General Lippitt. His bewildered concern over his wife's baffling illness, his naïve acceptance of John King's loverlike attentions, and his credulity about the stolen money all discredited the charge that he was planning to desert Madame.

Knowing better than to surrender to Madame's magic, the Colonel struggled spasmodically against it, and yet—and yet—he could not quite turn his back on all this mystery, promising admittance to a new world—and the fascination of Madame herself! Deferring to his indecision, Serapis offered Olcott an alternative to taking full responsibility for Madame. If he preferred, he might finance Betanelly! John King had paved the way by securing from the chiefs

## TRIAL AND ERROR

of the Russian government orders that promised to roll up profits of millions of dollars in the near future. But Betanelly "has no money and his brains are weak." Wouldn't the Colonel *try* to find him a partner? Serapis's next proposal was impudent in its effrontery. Mrs. Olcott's nephew had recently come into some money; the Colonel was to get it away from him. The boy was not to be trusted with money, and it would be safer in the control of the Colonel, who would handle it wisely "for the sake of the Cause, of yourself who need it for your boys and her, our sister." Serapis coolly signed this letter, "The holy blessing be with you, S." <sup>10</sup>

If Betanelly had served as an effective lever for raising money, the marriage might have lasted a little longer. But no more money was forthcoming, and she had no further use for him. On July 10, 1875, H.P.B. joined the Colonel in Boston. She never saw Betanelly again.

<sup>10</sup> *Letters M W*, II, 24

## CHAPTER VII



### CREATING A CULT

(1875—7)

THE Brotherhood of Luxor did not have to wait long for their first project. If Sister Helena was to correct the abuses of spiritualism she must have means of reaching the American public. Yet she found herself at the outset unable to get her communications published in either the daily papers or the two leading spiritualist weeklies because of her controversial style and abusive personal attacks. A third spiritualist weekly had recently been started in Boston, and the Brotherhood of Luxor promoted an alliance with its editor, Gerry Brown, as their first major objective

*The Spiritual Scientist* lacked capital, advertising, and readers, but H.P.B. undertook to secure all three. In addition to raising money from her men friends, H.P.B. had a windfall, a decision in her favor on her Long Island farm suit against the Jerebkos, and she spent this money in paying bills for the *Scientist*. For a short time during that spring of 1875 in Philadelphia, the struggling weekly became virtually a private publicity sheet, printing Madame's five- and six-thousand word articles in full. But as soon as her scanty funds ran out, Gerry Brown had no more room for her articles. After pleading, flattering, cajoling, promis-

## CREATING A CULT

ing in vain, Madame lost her temper, wrote insultingly to Gerry, and ceased to hear from him at all. She could not even be sure that he read her letters. Her helpless rage at his wall of silence had helped to put her to bed in June; as Betanelly phrased it, when no letters came from Boston "she got mad and felt worse."

To meet this impasse H.P.B. devised an elaborate stratagem. She would reach Brown through an intermediary whom he dared not ignore, General Lippitt. But the General was no Olcott to be ordered about; she could not even tell him the facts. Instead, she concocted a grotesque situation and tried with wooden humor to bring it to life. Having recently issued warnings against John King, she followed up on June 12, 1875, with a childishly querulous letter of complaint about him. John had burst into her sick room the other night, she wrote the General, boisterously interrupting her conversation with two friends:

"I say, Ellie."

"Well, what are you up to again, you villain?"

"I wrote a letter, my lass, a love letter—"

"For God's sake to whom?"

"You did not receive a letter today from Gerry Brown, Ellie, did you?"

"No, I did not. What about Mr. Brown?"

"Well, he won't write to you no more. He is mad with you."

"What did you tell him, John, you mischievous devil, I want to know."

"Why, I didn't tell him much, I only gave him a friendly hint or two, told him about you being such a sweet-tempered she-cat, explained how you swear at me in different languages and assured him that you abused him fearfully to everyone who comes to visit you. Furthermore, I told him you looked like a fancy she-dumpling, sitting up in your bed, as solemn as a Cathedral, and as cross as a butcher's bull dog. He is disgusted with you, and I am going to shut you out from his *Scientist* altogether. . . ." <sup>1</sup>

This rigmarole is not as foolish as it sounds: it had a practical purpose. H.P.B. explained to the General that she was

<sup>1</sup> *Theosophist*, January 24, 1924.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

very much alarmed, that while John might have been fooling, he was also quite capable of having forged an abusive letter from her to Brown to stir up trouble. Would the General help her out by reading this letter to Brown and letting her know whether he had received such a forgery, so that she could explain and make amends? It is a preposterous story, creaking in every joint, but it was not when Madame's vivid personality was behind it. The proof is that the General did read the letter to Brown and that correspondence was resumed.

Confident of her power to talk anyone into anything, Madame was eager to see Brown face to face. The expense of starting a weekly of her own was prohibitive for the present. Brown had somehow gotten over that hurdle, and his paper while anemic was still viable. Establishing intimate relations with Brown was a *must*. When Olcott told her that he was going to Boston in July to "investigate" the séances of Mary Baker Thayer for the *New York Sun*, she was delighted and terminated her liaison with Betanelly to coincide with the trip to Boston.

The Brotherhood of Luxor came to Sister Helena's assistance in full force. Serapis assured the Colonel that his entire future depended on his securing the co-operation of our dear young brother, Gerry Brown. The Colonel hung back. Still ruffled over Betanelly, he needed a breather before taking on another callow youth. But Serapis kept on pushing. Brother Henry (Olcott) must devote all his spare time to dear young Brother Gerry, on whom everything depended; he must *try* to see him alone in order to win his confidence.<sup>2</sup>

Soon the Brothers were plugging a second theme. Olcott must remain in Boston: his interests were inseparable from H.P.B. and Gerry Brown. When the Alliance failed to show progress, the Brotherhood put on pressure. Olcott must make the youth "open his heart"; in Brown's life history

<sup>2</sup> *Letters M.W.*, II, 25, 37.

## CREATING A CULT

there were secret pages that it was his duty to track down; unctuously, Serapis told the Colonel that he alone had the magnetism to gain Gerry's confidence. Suddenly Serapis changed his tone. Brother Henry must put the screws on the young man. The Brotherhood "who read the youth's secret thoughts" had been merciful—so far—and had withheld what they knew about him, but . . . This came dangerously close to blackmail. It was part of Madame's morbid power that she could make such crooked ways appear tolerable to Colonel Olcott, late confidential investigator for the United States Government.

Madame and the Brotherhood gave this proposed alliance their all. Everything was at stake—the Colonel's future, Madame's life, the success of the Holy Cause, the welfare of mankind! Nothing happened. Brown needed money. Madame did not have it and could not get it. Taking it in her stride, H.P.B. explained away this wrong guess by the Brothers and dismissed Gerry Brown with an epitaph in her scrapbook. She had spent over one thousand dollars to pay his debts and support his paper, but he had refused to reciprocate. "The man might have become a Power but preferred to remain an Ass. *De gustibus non disputandum est.*"

There were other irons in the Boston fires. An inveterate lion-hunter, H.P.B. pushed General Lippitt and her Boston friends for introductions. She had been cultivating several eligible Bostonians: Epes Sargent, for instance, cousin of the portrait painter, descendant of Governor Winthrop, poet, dramatist, and lately retired as editor of the *Boston Transcript*. Everyone recognized Sargent's dapper figure as, swinging his polished black cane, he roved up and down Beacon Hill, an elegant, cheerful little man, embodiment of the sacred Boston traditions. As far back as March 9, the same day that Tuitit Bey wrote his first letter to Olcott, Madame had written to General Lippitt about Epes Sargent. She had just read his new book, *Proofs Palpable*, and



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

it was the best account of spiritualism that she had seen in America; in fact, she wrote, "I am in love with him," and the General must tell him that he had "perfectly psychologized a true born Cossack and made her fall in love with him." Whether the General ever delivered the message or not, Madame had no luck with Mr. Sargent.

There were also such lesser celebrities as the Reverend J. H. Wiggin, suave and courtly, who wrote appreciations of H.P.B., comparing her to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and who would shortly resign his Unitarian pulpit to become ghost-writer number one on the staff of Mary Baker Eddy. A native New Englander, Mrs. Eddy found hospitable soil for her new cult in the city of Boston, but not so the flamboyant alien, Blavatsky. She proved irresistible to an amazing variety of people, from major-generals to mystics. But Brahman Boston? No.

Olcott's investigation of Mrs. Thayer's séances, which had begun early in July 1875, went on and on for five weeks. The luxury and sophisticated background of Mrs. Charles Houghton's home, where he and Madame were entertained, were grateful after the months with Betanelly. H.P.B. enjoyed driving into Boston behind prancing horses for the evening séances and then back to the suburbs through the starlit night. But she dared not relax, and plunged through the days taut as a fiddle string.

Convinced that Olcott could not be coerced into remaining in Boston, Serapis changed his theme to "Do Not Leave Her in Boston." If Olcott wanted to make further progress in occultism, if he aspired to initiation into the Mysteries, he must not desert Sister Helena, but must live with her. Success would surely crown his efforts if he aided "the poor broken-hearted woman." In the meantime, certain pressing debts were due on August 3. He must *try* to find the money; surely it should be easy to secure a loan on the security of that second judgment she was winning in the Long Island farm case, "poor, poor Sister."

## CREATING A CULT

While the Colonel struggled, Serapis adopted an even more pious tone, invoking God's blessing in every letter and offering man-to-man sympathy for Brother Henry's hours of black despondency: "Think of me, mine Brother and I will be with you." Serapis pressed a relentless attack upon the vulnerable heel of a genial, well-meaning, average man. Insidiously, Olcott was pried loose from his sense of obligation to wife and family, his ties of affection for his sons, the habits and associations of a lifetime. It is not a pleasant picture to watch. But labor pains are a grim business, and H.P.B. was in the throes of creating "something out of the way."

As the Thayer assignment drew to a close, Serapis accepted the inevitable and gave instructions for the return to New York in August 1875. He told Olcott to depart in peace, but made it clear that he must assume responsibility for H.P.B. and prevent her from returning in poverty and despair to her husband in Philadelphia. Serapis kindly suggested a way to handle the dear Sister: tell her you are both going to Philadelphia, but instead of that buy tickets only as far as New York for *both* of you. Arrived in New York, Henry must find her a suitable apartment and never let a single day pass without seeing her. If she were to return for even a few hours to "that polluted mortal, Betanelly," her powers would suffer, and this in turn would cast a blight on Olcott's progress.

There were also long range instructions for the future. Henry must promote the Sister, not as an adept of spiritualism but as "an intellectual writer." She must meet the best intellects of the country. Olcott's fortune would be assured if he would drop everything else and devote himself to her and to working on articles that the supernatural powers would dictate to him through Helena. Finally, he must not worry about his boys—they would be provided for. He should concentrate rather on the welfare of Sister Helena: "Watch over her and let her not come to harm,

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

our dear Sister who is so careless and thoughtless for herself."

It was very crude, but not too crude for the Colonel.

### 2. BIRTH AND BAPTISM

(1875)

On a September evening shortly after her return from Boston, Madame Blavatsky was hostess at an important meeting. She was back on Irving Place in New York, near the Lotos Club, and she lost no time in bringing together in her long, old-fashioned parlor all her former friends, devotees of occultism. Next to Olcott, the most important was a young Englishman, Charles Sotheran, editor of the *American Bibliopolist*, which specialized in news of rare books and incunabula. A man of independent means, he was a high-ranking Mason, a Rosicrucian, a student of the Cabala. Impressed by Madame's potential ability, Sotheran exercised an important influence in those early years. His versatility and his informed standards of judgment gave H.P.B. the support and direction she needed while she was floundering about equipped only with her natural magnetism and her interest in the occult. She was indebted to Sotheran for vital encouragement in her bold venture of cutting loose from her spiritualistic entanglements to set sail upon an uncharted sea.

Sotheran made his contribution and dropped out. He was too definite a person for H.P.B. to tolerate. William Quan Judge, a clerk in Olcott's law office, was just the reverse. A young Irishman with mystical leanings, always susceptible to new phases of magic and necromancy, he could see whatever Madame suggested. In the end, he became the leader of the American Theosophists.

There was Signor Bruzzesi, whom they called Il Conte, sculptor, magician, member of the *carbonari*, onetime secretary to Mazzini. He had known H.P.B. in Italy in the old

## CREATING A CULT

Metrovitch days, and he tried to warn Olcott of what Madame was doing to him. But Olcott's infatuation had gone too far. Before Bruzzesi could do any harm, H.P.B. disposed of him. She told him to go away, and he went. There were a New Jersey judge and his poetess wife in fluttering pastel scarves, Dr. Seth Pancoast, Madame's physician from Philadelphia, the Reverend J. H. Wiggin spending a vacation in New York. There were several varieties of cranks, faddists, and freaks, all members of the intelligentsia, "the part of a nation which aspires to independent thinking."<sup>3</sup>

It was Sotheran who brought the speaker for the first informal gathering, J. H. Felt, architect and engineer, who discussed Egyptian mysteries and the cabala. The company agreed to meet again on the following Tuesday evening, September 7, when Mr. Felt would lecture on "The Lost Canon of Proportion of the Egyptians." The seventeen people present were deeply impressed. Felt told them that the dog- and hawk-headed figures of Egyptian hieroglyphics were accurate pictures of elementals, the spirits who convey messages at séances. There was a flutter of excitement when he said that he had discovered ancient formulas for evoking these elementals, and agreed to demonstrate his powers if they would pay the cost of the apparatus.

Olcott was enchanted. With Sotheran to lead the way and Madame to furnish a magic spark, the Miracle Club's frustrated effort was happening of itself; the group was finding a common purpose. Olcott scribbled a hasty note: "Would it not be a good thing to form a society for this kind of study?" H.P.B. nodded assent. The suggestion was enthusiastically received. The Colonel was appointed Chairman, and later President, of the Theosophical Society. He treasured the memory that he had taken the initiative with his note, and never fully realized that Madame only used him as a screen behind which to work.

The infant Society was named by Sotheran. Alert to the

<sup>3</sup> *Concise Oxford Dictionary.*

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

danger of bogging down as one more séance circle, Sotheran searched for a name that was different. Miracle Club seemed to him cheap, Egyptological Society too limited. Leafing through the dictionary he found *theosophy*, an erudite and vague word; no one knew what it meant, which was perfect. They adopted it at the next meeting. Theosophy was born and baptized. Between the Colonel's love of red tape and Madame's ritualism, the Society was launched with all the pomp planned for the Miracle Club. They voted an official policy of secrecy; members wrote F.T.S. (Fellow, Theosophical Society) after their names and recognized each other by secret signs, most of them borrowed from Egyptian occultism and the Grand Lodge of Cairo. Most important of all, they established dues for membership.

In view of H.P.B.'s concern to get a dues-paying society started, it was surprising that she should go away at this critical moment. But she had a new idea that took precedence over everything. Prominent among the group attending these first meetings were two pioneer spiritualists, Emma Hardinge Britten, an Englishwoman, and her husband, a former Universalist minister. Comparison of the two women would suggest that Mrs. Britten had the better chance of attaining fame, yet she is the one forgotten.

Mrs. Britten was an attractive woman and successful medium known on both sides of the Atlantic. She had participated in a recent investigation of spiritualism by the London Dialectical Society. She had an important advantage over Madame Blavatsky in that she was a gifted speaker: month after month the spiritualist weeklies printed her ninety-minute orations in full! Today they seem a dreary waste of words, but, delivered in the elocutionary tradition of the period, they made her famous. Cooper Union had to turn people away on the April day in 1865 when she delivered her "Funeral Oration on Abraham Lincoln," and she had been making the welkin ring in a

## CREATING A CULT

refined way ever since. As pioneers the Brittens had a proprietary attitude toward spiritualism. Recognizing Madame Blavatsky as a potential power, they watched her with misgivings and accepted positions on the committee in order to keep an eye on her.

At their first meeting Mrs. Britten had announced the publication of *Art Magic*. She modestly insisted that she was only the amanuensis, not the author, for the new book had been dictated to her by a learned French adept, the Chevalier Louis, a lifelong and honored friend. Unable to find a publisher, Mrs. Britten had published the book herself and was charging five dollars for it. She wrote the Colonel a polite note, staking her claim and recognizing the coincidence that the book already in print and the newly organized Society were both based on an affirmation of certain elements of occultism: "the dignity of ancient Occult science, the existence of Adepts, the reality of the contrast between White and Black magic, the existence of the Astral Light, the swarming of Elemental races in the regions air, earth . . ." <sup>4</sup>

It dawned upon H.P.B. that she was missing another opportunity. First she had been too late for the heyday of spiritualism, and now this Englishwoman had gotten ahead of her with a book of higher criticism pointing out the abuses of spiritualism, sounding the clarion note of reform, rallying mankind to the lofty traditions cherished from time immemorial. And—clever idea—it had all been dictated to her by an adept.

When H.P.B.'s efforts to tie up Gerry Brown and his weekly came to nothing, she had inevitably considered writing a book. Her patchy education, her years of self-indulgence, her total lack of training, made it a formidable prospect. During the summer she had taken the precaution of showing the Colonel several sheets of manuscript. "I wrote this last night 'by order' but what the deuce it is to

<sup>4</sup> Olcott: *O.D.L.*, I, 186.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

be, I don't know. Perhaps it is for a newspaper article, perhaps for a book, perhaps for nothing; anyhow, I did as I was ordered." Then, said the Colonel, she put the pages back in a bureau drawer.<sup>5</sup>

At the second meeting of her infant Society, on September 13, Madame listened enviously to the discussion of Mrs. Britten's new book. By the next morning she was on her way, in a rush that made Olcott's head spin. The previous spring Professor Hiram Corson of Cornell had invited her to visit his home. Now she must go at once. But, but, quavered Olcott—the Society? Madame gave him a withering glance. Did he presume to question the orders of the Brotherhood of Luxor? Olcott obediently sat down and wrote to Professor Corson, apologizing for Madame's delay in answering his last letter; she had been so absorbed in things of another world. "Madame Blavatsky will probably go to Albany by tomorrow evening's boat." He dared not be more definite; she could change her plans a dozen times before tomorrow evening.

She did not change her mind. If that frivolous, fluttering Britten woman could write a book, so could she, and a better one. But she must have help. A professor in a university ought to do nicely; he sounded like an "intellectual writer." Professor Corson was head of the Department of English Literature at Cornell and widely known for his popular studies of the standard English authors: Browning, Tennyson, Shakespeare. Corson on Browning was a classic in women's clubs and Browning Societies. Mrs. Corson, the former Caroline Rollin of Paris and Boston, was another "intellectual writer," rather far ahead of her time, for she was translating Pierre Janet on *The Mental State of Hystericals* in the early 90's. After the death of their only daughter in July 1874, the Corsons had become ardent spiritualists and like most bereaved devotees were on the lookout for mediums having greater "power," able to receive clearer

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., I, 202

## CREATING A CULT

messages from the loved ones on the other side. On the strength of H.P.B.'s extravagant declarations in support of their cult, the Professor had invited her to visit them. She wrote warning him of her wild Russian ways. She smoked, she swore, she had numerous bad habits. But he only repeated the invitation.

The Corsons lived high up the hillside overlooking Lake Cayuga; they were disappointed when Madame never even glanced at their view. They were taken aback too by the way she made herself at home, requiring many special attentions, but giving little in return. She dressed in her customary loose wrappers, spotted and untidy, under gaudy Russian jackets. Cigarette papers in one pocket, a bag of tobacco in the other, she smoked perpetually, as much as two hundred cigarettes a day, the Professor said, sprinkling tobacco and ashes over the rugs, throwing stubs everywhere until the flower pots were full of them. They could not induce her to go for a walk; instead she sat bent over a desk, turning out twenty-five pages of manuscript and innumerable letters each day. She set the Professor to checking her classical quotations in the Cornell Library, and he told his friends that she was a smart woman, "but ignorant of all the graces and amenities of life, she is a great Russian bear."<sup>6</sup>

H.P.B. left her desk long enough to visit the local photographer, the Professor going along to carry a valise full of Russian scarves and jackets. She was so well pleased that she ordered five dozen of the pictures. At the end of a fortnight, Mrs. Corson, insisting that she needed fresh air, took her for a drive, cautioning her that she must not smoke in public. Before long, however, she demanded a cigarette. Older residents of Ithaca hand down an amusing story of Madame's insisting that they stop the horses; sitting on a rock beside the road, with her back still turned to the view, she peacefully had her smoke.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene Rollin Corson: *Some Unpublished Letters of H. P. Blavatsky*, p. 120.



### *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

The refusal by Madame to hold séances served as a final test of the Corsons' patience. When, at the end of a month, in mid-October 1875, she seemed settled for an indefinite stay, her hosts reluctantly asked her to go, and there was constraint on both sides at parting. H.P.B. did not propose to lose such a celebrity as Dr. Corson, however, and she refused to take offense, writing a short time later: "This is my third letter, and no answer. . . . Are you mad with me?"

#### 3. ISIS UNVEILED

(1875-7)

Back in New York, H.P.B. was forced to submit to the common lot of authors. Shaking off her preoccupation with writing, she had occasionally to render first aid to the casualties of daily life. Book or no book, the Society demanded attention. Anticipating her return from Ithaca, the Colonel had called a meeting of the Society for the very next day, October 13, 1875. H.P.B. made a wry face when she learned that he had innocently accepted Mrs. Britten's offer to meet in her home. It never happened again.

Living arrangements were also hanging fire. Serapis had done effective spadework. Madame Blavatsky and the Colonel took apartments temporarily on West 34th Street, where the Lincoln Tunnel now dives under the Hudson River. They soon moved to a large, pleasant apartment at 302 West 47th Street, nicknamed by their newspaper friends The Lamasery. The Colonel, though no great success as a lawyer, had previously supported his family in modest comfort. When he abandoned his wife to live openly with another woman, his insistence on a Platonic relationship was not convincing to Mrs. Olcott. The move to 47th street marked Olcott's complete surrender to H.P.B. Serapis had failed with Gerry Brown, but he succeeded with Olcott: "Remain firmly linked together and TRY to

## CREATING A CULT

inhabit the same places where her fate, guided by the wisdom of the Brotherhood may lead her to."

Forewarned by grim memories of those last years in Odessa with Metrovitch, H.P.B. had no intention of submitting to petty economies, and she made it clear from the outset that she had no domestic accomplishments, trying to boil the breakfast eggs by placing them in their shells on the live coals. Olcott gave in and hired a negro servant. On Sundays, the maid's night out, Olcott not Madame, got supper. They changed servants frequently; the girls objected to the spooky goings-on and to Madame's hair-trigger temper. Olcott's first hurdle in the fascinating new life was adapting himself to these tempers. As soon as he was publicly committed, H.P.B. no longer troubled to conceal her mounting irritation with his leisurely, provincial ways. Serapis's quaint wooing of Brother Mine ended abruptly. Olcott had burned his bridges, and Madame did not spare him. Confident that he would not rebel, she flew into towering rages regardless of who was present. Some of the guests were embarrassed, some amused. Dr. Rawson, her beau in those long-ago Egyptian days, has described these scenes with wry humor: Helena, the brilliant fascinating hostess one minute, scorching the ears of the company the next. On the most trivial pretext she would fly into a "divine passion," working herself into a frenzy, cursing and screaming at Olcott until she was making only "insane yawps." It was, said the Doctor with impersonal objectivity, an amusing though hair-raising spectacle. Something a shade proprietary in Sotheran's attitude frequently goaded her into tantrums.

"I say, Sotheran," Rawson asked him one day, "why will you persist in rousing the tigress?"

Sotheran tipped his head back and smiled. "It is the best way to open the storehouse of her spirit," he replied.

The Lamasery was in an old-fashioned walk-up apartment

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

house—flats they were called—still standing on the southwest corner of 8th Avenue and 47th Street, red brick and brown stone with granite trim. The library became a famous room, a salon where H.P.B. presided as prophetess and sybil over an infatuated group, forever eager for new wonders. The room was a Victorian potpourri: plush chairs and sofas, bear skin rugs, palms, pedestals, and statuary. A stuffed owl looked down from a gilded cornice over velvet draperies; a suit of armor grasped a pike. One side of the room was a mural, a jungle effect of dried leaves glued to the wall and in the foreground a cardboard elephant and tiger, real stuffed lizards, and a baboon, a serpent coiled about the trunk of a palm tree, all rather dusty. A lion's head peered over a clump of grass; a bat with outspread wings hovered transfixed over the doorway. Crowded bookshelves and a desk piled high with papers gave a flavor of the workshop. The "Theosophical Twins" amused themselves window-shopping in Sixth Avenue pawnshops, picking up tarnished curios: a cuckoo clock, lacquer cabinets, a placid Buddha. They followed a simple, hard-working routine, breakfast at 8, dinner at 6. It had been Olcott's custom to drop in at the Lotos Club every afternoon, but he soon gave up his club as well as his family, hurrying back to the Lamasery to sit beside H.P.B. and edit the day's output of manuscript.

Of the dozen men who formed H.P.B.'s intimate circle during the two years (1875-77) that she was writing *Isis Unveiled*, three played leading parts: Sotheran, who provided the initial inspiration and suggested the direction and mood of the new cult; Olcott, who paid the bills, edited the manuscript, and supported her with unshattered admiration and credulity, and Dr. Wilder, old friend of Olcott's, scholar, antiquarian, and occultist.

Alexander Wilder represented the American homemade scholarship of an earlier day. Helena cultivated him

## CREATING A CULT

shrewdly. Although he was another of those odd American types, and not a gentleman in her sense, she perceived his quality. She repeated the soothing treatment that she and Serapis had given Olcott, but more cautiously. Olcott told her all he knew about the man. At fifteen, Wilder had become a schoolteacher in the simple farming community of his native Oneida County, New York. After an unhappy few years married to a cousin, he left her and went to the big city. Gradually Helena won his confidence, encouraged him to talk about his versatile past. He had supplemented schoolteaching with farming and typesetting, between times teaching himself Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. A man of deep prejudices, he disapproved of the current practice of medicine and put himself through Syracuse Medical College in order to be independent of physicians. A few years of newspaper work in Syracuse prepared him for a position on the editorial staff of the New York *Evening Post* where he remained for fifteen years, dabbling in New York and New Jersey politics. Pursuing the hobby of his own brand of medicine, he founded successively an Eclectic Medical Society, school, and magazine. He had written a dozen books and served as editor and collaborator for another dozen, studies of occultism and magic bearing formidable titles, *Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries*, *Serpent and Siva Worship*, or *A Translation of the Theurgian of Iamblichos*. He was an authority on Plato.

The circumstance that Dr. Wilder was on the staff of J. W. Bouton was not the least of his charms. Bouton the publisher, alert for rising tides of interest, had begun several years earlier to reprint the classics of occult and esoteric literature, previously accessible only to scholars in the world's great libraries. Suddenly these books had acquired a public titillated by pretentious titles and willing to pay from seven to ten dollars per volume to see what was inside. Bouton's lists ran over the borders of his field into

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

such scholarly erotica as Pierre Dufour's six-volume *History of Prostitution* and a one-volume (but very learned) treatise on phallic symbolism priced at thirty-five dollars.

As Bouton's expert on esoterica, Dr. Wilder recommended the publication of *Isis Unveiled*, on which he was an unacknowledged collaborator. He had moved to Newark on his appointment as Inspector of Education in that city, but he was in New York several times a week lecturing at medical schools, and he enjoyed stopping in to see the brilliant H.P.B. Returning to his drab furnished room at night, it was pleasant to find a note from her patting him on the back, showing intelligent appreciation of his latest edition of the classics. Olcott was out of town, she wrote, but he would be back in time to discuss that legal problem, or she could send downtown for the clerk, Judge. She would have a bed ready for him for Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, and would expect him for dinner on all those days, so please come! There were several matters on her mind; Bouton had told her to have Dr. Wilder decide whether to make *Isis* one or two volumes. And then the Introduction—would he kindly write a "Profession of Faith" to insert at the beginning of Part III?

Madame exploiting her childhood glimpses of Siberian shamans, her Egyptian adventures with Rawson, could not resist patronizing the doctor: she could not imagine where he had picked up some of his information, which she happened to know was held in closest secrecy. "Well, you ought to go East and get initiated!" The Doctor smiled at her superior tone. It is easy to recognize the rise of the doctor's influence by the sudden appearance in October 1875 of learned references to Iamblichos, Porphyry, Apollonius, the Neo-Platonists in H.P.B.'s conversation and writings. Dr. Wilder, student, supplemented Colonel Olcott, promoter, to perfection. The Doctor had a scholar's instincts, loving the work for its own sake, scorning headlines. Innocent of the urge to see his name in print, he had

## CREATING A CULT

spent many years of his life editing, translating, and annotating the work of others. Madame credited him with preparing the fifty-page index of *Isis Unveiled*, for which he was paid by Bouton. She also gave him the acknowledgment of forty or fifty footnotes. These were the least of his contributions. She drew on him liberally for ideas, material, references, and criticism. Wilder was content to let the credit go. He had enjoyed the friendship of this unusual woman, and he was accustomed to rendering the unacknowledged services of editor and ghost-writer.

Repudiating human assistance, H.P.B. ascribed the authorship of *Isis* not to herself, but to the Masters of Wisdom who used her as a mouthpiece, sometimes occupying her body, sometimes dictating to her. At her desk she acted her part with gusto, and Olcott was impressed as he watched her; hour after hour her hand flew back and forth across the sheets. Suddenly she would stop, gazing into space with a vacant eye, look at something hanging invisible in the air before her, and begin to copy it down. After two years of daily collaboration, Olcott was convinced that she drew the twelve hundred pages of *Isis* from the astral light and from her spirit guides. One such collaborator was the Old Platonist who, remaining invisible, talked by the hour, dictating copy, checking references, answering questions. The spirit Old Platonist would be more convincing if there had not been an Old Platonist in the flesh—Dr. Wilder, who also talked by the hour, checking references and answering questions. This idea of supernatural dictation was not new; it is found in most cults. H.P.B. may also have owed a direct suggestion to Mrs. Britten and her adept, the Chevalier Louis, who dictated *Art Magic*.

Theosophists call particular attention to Madame's amazing feat in producing this two-volume work including hundreds of citations and quotations without access to the great libraries. The Colonel said that their working library contained scarcely one hundred books of reference. On exami-

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

nation, this claim rather falls to pieces. At least half a dozen men in H.P.B.'s intimate circle either owned or had access to exceptional collections of esoterica. Sotheran, as editor of the *Bibliopolist*, specialized in rare editions. Dr. Seth Pancoast had the finest private collection of books on occultism in the United States; Dr. Ditson of Albany also had a collection. Dr. Wilder, editor of Bouton's reprints of the classics of occultism, was engaged in research over the entire field.

The devastating criticism of William Emmette Coleman showed how to eliminate any need for real research. Coleman made a meticulous study, tracing back all of H.P.B.'s learned quotations to one hundred standard reference books, which he named. He listed the number of plagiarized passages, which ran as high as one hundred and thirty-four from Dunlap's *Sod: the Son of the Man*, and one hundred and seven from Ennemoser's *History of Magic*. Coleman was convinced that H.P.B.'s pretense of having consulted original documents was all a bluff. It is interesting that Coleman's one hundred titles coincides with Olcott's estimate of their library.

The last stages of producing *Isis* were a nightmare. It is a shock to any writer to read his first set of proofs. Phrases that seemed to do well enough in manuscript stare back mockingly from the formality of printed type. Untamed by any experience of a writer's discipline, H.P.B. had probably never heard of such ideals as unity, coherence, and brevity. When her galley proofs came back, she was beside herself. In vain the more experienced Olcott tried to restrain her. She changed and slashed until Mr. Bouton put his foot down. He was printing only one thousand copies, and when her alterations had cost him six hundred dollars, he refused to accept further changes. He did not know his Helena. She continued to make corrections even after the metal plates had been cast, having the metal cut in order to transpose paragraphs and insert additional material.

## CREATING A CULT

Finally, in September 1875, *Isis* appeared, two volumes, twelve hundred pages. Madame had wanted to write a *vade mecum* for the use of every Theosophist, but her weakness for superlatives betrayed her. *Isis Unveiled* was too long, too heavy, too formidable, to become the beloved companion of the faithful. H.P.B. was further handicapped in that she had not yet formulated the objectives of her Society. So far she had announced only that it would "collect and diffuse knowledge of the laws which govern the universe," a grandiose ideal that would cover almost any development, but did not lend itself to intimate treatment.

*Isis Unveiled* supported this vague statement, for Madame had a theme in mind that gave the sprawling books a certain harassed unity or direction. It was that all religions are an expression of the same fundamental truth and spring from the same supreme source, but that they deteriorate rapidly at the hands of man through commercialism, priestcraft, and hypocrisy. Volume one covered the field of science; volume two finished off theology. Attacking the pretensions of both, H.P.B. sought to prove that their achievements were sterile and confused because they had become detached from the main stream of truth, the ancient teachings of occultism.

In an encounter that she later elaborated into a mystical revelation, Madame had been commissioned by supernatural powers to rescue this body of ultimate truth for the benefit of mankind. She thought of it in curiously simplified terms. It was The Ancient Wisdom, secret laws and formulas that had given the adepts of old control of occult forces, power to perform occult phenomena. With the advance of science and materialism, man has discarded this lore as ignorant superstition, thereby losing supernatural powers that Madame claimed to possess and that she proposed to restore to such Theosophists as proved worthy. With ingenious variations she was following the familiar



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

pattern of the saint, distinguished from the mass of mankind by a revelation.

*Isis Unveiled* was an olla-podrida, a catchall, overflowing with myths, fragments, borrowings from the classics, every item intended to bolster up and somehow authenticate the mysteries of magic and sorcery. The primary purpose of the book was to restore the prestige of occultism and the black arts. Chapters on serpent worship, devil myths, witchcraft, and alchemy rubbed shoulders with theories of psychic phenomena, a mocking chapter on *The Infallibility of Modern Science*, and such quaint perversions as a "scientific report" that in the state of Wyoming male rabbits had been observed suckling their young.

Unhindered by literary conventions, Madame Blavatsky used this opportunity to toss bouquets to men who might be useful: Horace Greeley; the Honorable John L. O'Sullivan, ex-Ambassador to Portugal; P. B. Randolph, leading American Rosicrucian; Prince Wittgenstein; the Honorable A. N. Aksakov. Conversely she permitted herself vigorous whacks at her antipathies. The Order of Jesuits led her black list, followed by the Roman Catholic Church, all Protestant churches and their clergy, especially the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, almost all scientists, and almost all spiritualists, especially D. D. Home.

Making allowance for adverse criticisms—that her collaborators did much of the work, that Madame plagiarized on a vast scale—*Isis Unveiled* is a monument to more than industry and tenacity; it has that certain intrepidity which radiates from a vision of old facts transformed by a new and original approach. Fundamentally *Isis* was the expression of a brilliant and frustrated woman rebelling against the humdrum routine of life, escaping like Alice through a looking-glass into a world where everything was fascinating because it was different, off the normal. But Madame was more than an iconoclast, she was, in her day, a pioneer in her defense of ancient and especially Oriental civilizations, in promot-

## CREATING A CULT

ing recognition of and respect for the achievements of the past. With sketchy and inaccurate knowledge of Buddhism and Brahmanism, she confidently brought their wisdom and culture to the attention of the rest of the world. In *Isis Unveiled* Madame did valuable spade work in attacking the smug complacency of the West. She contributed to the leavening influence that is gradually breaking down the old white-man's-burden arrogance in England and the United States and preparing the way for a spirit of internationalism.

*Isis Unveiled* was also ahead of its time in the field of science. Although Madame showed no discrimination, accepting transparent hoaxes as scientific findings, she gave genuine recognition to the importance of early experiments in mesmerism, hypnotism, telepathy. Several generations of psychologists have devoted their lives to patient experimentation, hoping to establish principles that Madame glimpsed, approved, and swallowed in a hasty gulp. Perhaps her sensitiveness to unseen forces, her groping for an applied science to control such forces is the nearest we can come to a definition of her mysterious, but by all accounts overpowering, psychic quality.

Galloping off in all directions at once to tilt at every windmill in sight, Doña Quixote Blavatsky added spiritualism to her main objects of attack, Christianity and modern science. Although it must have hurt her to agree with D. D. Home, *Isis* followed his lead in pointing out the weakness and the danger of spiritualism, the overwhelming temptation to cheat that it imposed upon frail human nature. It is doubtful that Madame could have made a living out of a conscientious exploitation of her glimpses of truth. Ironically she fell victim to the very danger that her book expounded to the spiritualists, the temptation to pretend to more psychic power than she had, and to progress by easy stages from cautious beginnings to gross fraud and hocus-pocus.

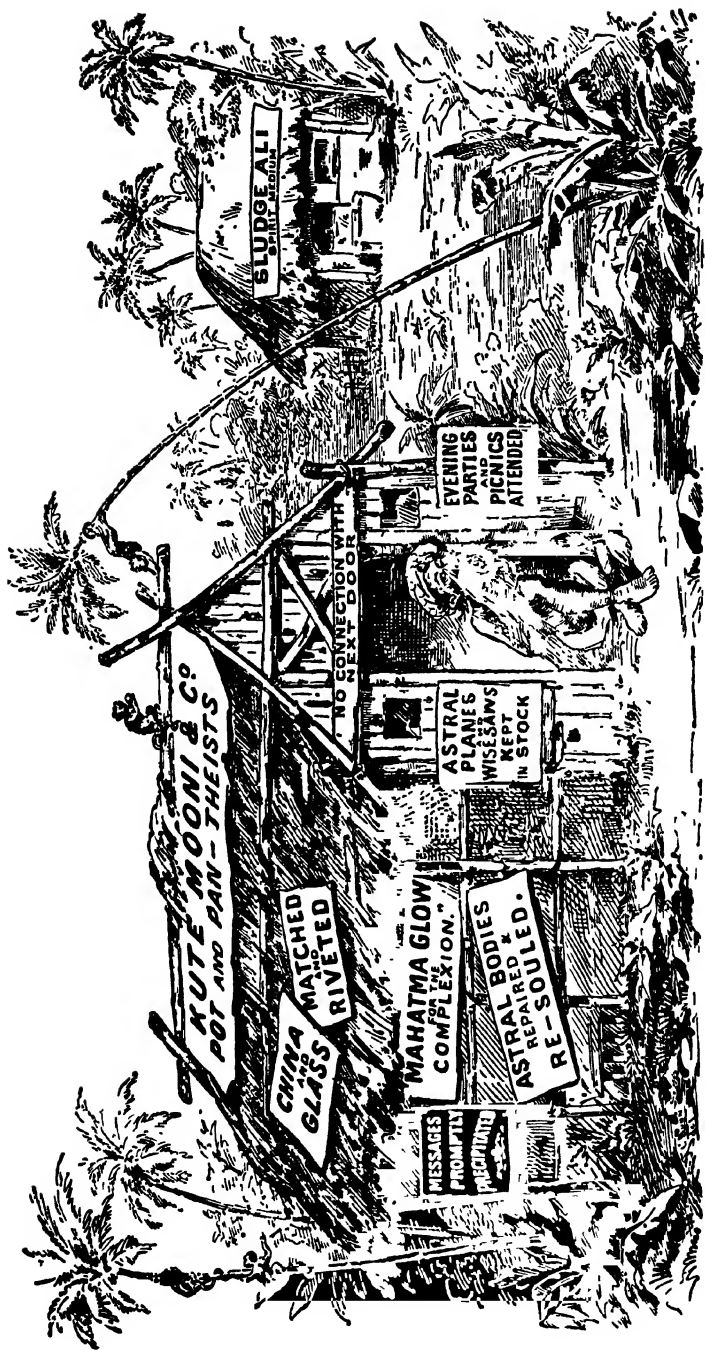
The reception of *Isis Unveiled* was disappointing. At first the spiritualist press was respectful, overawed by the

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

size. But the daily press had no inhibitions. "A large dish of hash," quipped the *Springfield Republican*. "Discarded rubbish," scoffed the New York *Sun*. "Crude and undigested," grumbled the *Tribune*, and thought that Madame's incoherent accounts of Brahmanism and Buddhism suggested presumption rather than information. The New York *Times* refused to review the book and, in answer to Bouton's protests, explained privately that they had "a holy horror of Madame Blavatsky and her letters." Let the critics jeer. The edition sold out within ten days and *The American Bookseller* commented: "The sale is unprecedented for a work of its kind."

When *Isis Unveiled* was three days old, the happy parent wrote to her friend M. Aksakov: "My darling was born last Saturday, September 29th." She enclosed a clipping from the New York *Herald*, the only daily to carry a neutral review. Proudly H.P.B. quoted: the book "is one of the most remarkable productions of the century." That might mean anything.





Cartoon: "A Mahatma at home"

## CHAPTER VIII



### *NECROMANCY Inc.*

(1876—7)

SO FAR the Theosophical Society was only a potential organization. Taking Mr. Felt's tall talk literally, the members had elected him Vice-President, financed him to the extent of one hundred dollars, and waited hopefully for his dog-faced elementals. He never produced any, confessed Olcott, "not even the tip end of the tail of the tiniest nature-spirit."

The spiritualists snickered. Antagonized by H.P.B.'s self-appointed mission to clean them up and by her patronizing quotations from the illuminati, they all resigned when the dog-faces failed to appear. Madame, absorbed in *Isis Unveiled*, had to let the Society languish except for occasional publicity stunts.

One Sunday morning in July 1876 the Founders noticed an item in the paper about nine ship-wrecked Mussulman Arabs who, after wandering about the streets for two days and nights, had been given emergency shelter in Bellevue Hospital. The word Mussulman caught H.P.B.'s eye; nothing from the East was alien to her. As Olcott told the press, "They are fellow heathen like ourselves—we must help them." He raised two thousand dollars and arranged to return his heathen brethren to Tunis in charge of E. S.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

The procession will move in the following order:

Col. Olcott as high priest, wearing a leopard skin and carrying a roll of papyrus (brown card-board).

Mr. Cobb as Sacred Scribe with style and tablet.

Egyptian mummy case, borne upon a sledge drawn by four oxen.

(Also a slave bearing a pot of lubricating oil).

Mme. Blavatsky as Chief Mourner and Bearer of the Sistrum.

Colored boy bearing 3 Abyssinian geese (Philadelphia chickens).

Vice-President Felt, with the eye of Osiris painted on his left breast and carrying an asp (bought at toy store on 8th avenue).

Dr. Pancoast singing an ancient Theban dirge:

*Isis and Mephtys, beginning and end;*

*One more victim to Amenti we send;*

*Pay we the fare and let us not tarry,*

*Cross the Styx by the Roosevelt street ferry.*

Boys carrying a large lotus (sunflower). . . <sup>1</sup>

The Colonel claimed that the buffoonery cost him a client worth ten thousand dollars a year, but it remained a fond memory, and in his memoirs he devoted thirty-eight pages to this foolish episode.

Disillusionment followed. The first shock came when the Colonel opened the Baron's trunk and found two of his own shirts with his name tags ripped off. The trunk also contained some shabby underwear, unpaid bills, letters from actresses, and old passports. That was all. The Colonel claimed that the Wisconsin acreage had been sold for taxes, that the Chicago property was worthless, that the castles existed only in the air. It seems strange however, that the Colonel as lawyer and executor did not discover more promptly that the Baron's estate existed only on paper. Half a year after the Baron's death, H.P.B. was still making elaborate plans for an around-the-world expedition of eight persons to be financed by his bequest.

According to more sympathetic accounts, the Baron had hobnobbed with half the crowned heads of Europe during

<sup>1</sup> Olcott: *O.D.L.*, I, 153.

## NECROMANCY, INC.

his diplomatic career and had been decorated with the highest insignia of Catholic knighthood. In this country he had negotiated with such bigwigs as Astor, Stewart, and Commodore Vanderbilt. A widely circulated report that he had left in his trunk a manuscript that was the basis of her *Isis Unveiled* was particularly vexing to Madame. To discredit the Baron she had Olcott publish correspondence from Bavarian officials that, while confirming his descent from an old and noble family, stated that he had a dubious record of debts and debauchery.

Gossip about H.P.B.'s indebtedness to the Baron boiled over into the press. William H. Burr, official reporter of the United States Senate, called on Dr. Wilder in several open letters to affirm or deny the charges that he had helped to write *Isis* and that the original manuscript had been left to H.P.B. by the late Baron de Palm. After long delay, Dr. Wilder issued an evasive denial. Many years later the Doctor, who weighed his words and had known the Baron well, wrote that "whatever the Baron possessed of value he bestowed upon them," clearly implying that the Baron had possessed something of value and that he gave it to H.P.B. and the Colonel.<sup>2</sup>

On the theory that any old publicity was better than none, H.P.B. continued to lend herself to trivial adventures and facetious publicity: a trip to the circus to pass judgment on Egyptian sorcerers, who turned out to be French jugglers, an all-night watch on a wind-swept pile of lumber beside the East River—with some reporters—for a ghost that failed to walk. Scraping the bottom of the publicity barrel, she signed her name to a bizarre document. No sooner had *Isis* gone to press than she wrote, on May 5, 1877, a remarkable letter to the *New York World*. A Chinese lecturer, Wong Chin Foo, had been her guest at the Lamasery, and she complained that Mr. Wong and other friends had received anonymous warnings accusing her of drunkenness,

<sup>2</sup> *The Word*, 1908.



## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

forgery, being a Russian spy, being an anti-Russian spy, having been jailed for theft, murdering seven husbands, bigamy, being the mistress of Colonel Olcott, of a Polish Count, and of an acrobat—"other things might be mentioned but decency forbids." (See Appendix E, page 322.)

This Paul Bunyan extravaganza list is most significant. It employed one of H.P.B.'s favorite weapons, ridiculing accusations by the use of fantastic exaggeration. The murder of seven husbands was grotesque, and it was supposed to make all the other charges seem equally absurd. But many of them were true or nearly true, bigamy for instance. The mistress of a Polish Count suggests Baron Meyendorf; the mistress of an acrobat suggests her circus experience. Perhaps the seven husbands (unmurdered) were not too wide of the mark! Her mention of the Russian spy charge at this early date is particularly interesting: the same accusation caused her great embarrassment in India a few years later. If it was false, as she indignantly claimed, it seems odd that she should have anticipated the charge years in advance. This list of voluntary self-indictments, broadcast to the world through a daily newspaper, is a remarkably suggestive performance. It resembled a confession, and curiously suggests the compulsion of a criminal to revisit the scene of his crime.

It satisfied some perverse urge for Madame to call herself names in public but she fought back savagely when others tried it. Her bitterest controversy was with Daniel Home, the famous medium, who, rising from humble beginnings showed an aptitude for intimacy with titles and crowned heads. He must have been a skilful diplomat, but not with H.P.B. He never forgave her for charging his intimate friend Baron Meyendorf with the paternity of her child. After Home's early retirement he wrote several books exposing the abuses and frauds practiced by many mediums, and in his last book he devoted an entire chapter of withering satire to the pretensions of Theosophists. He centered

## NECROMANCY, INC.

this attack on Olcott, but gave Madame some severe raps. He could not have humiliated her more effectively than by pointing out the absurdity of her story about her father's medal (page 72). For Home, a nobody, had married Mlle Julie, daughter of a Russian Councillor of State, receiving a wedding present from the Czar himself, and having an entrée to those circles from which H.P.B. had exiled herself and which she so passionately regretted. She plunged into incoherent counterattack: Home was dragging her through the ditches . . . she hoped to God the immaculate medium would leave Theosophy alone, confine his attentions to her and "cast his venomous slime solely upon my . . . broad back. . . ."

Only the *Spiritual Scientist* would print her invective, and she realized that this moribund little sheet could not hurt Daniel Home lounging in luxurious ease on the Riviera with his charming Julie. By a lucky chance she had a more direct access: A. N. Aksakov was Julie's first cousin and sufficiently important to be able to exert pressure on the great Daniel. Helena poured out her grievances in seven long letters to Aksakov: how was she interfering with Home, she who had devoted her whole life to the study of the cabala and the occult sciences? She really could not "just because the devil got me into trouble in my youth, go and rip up my stomach now like a Japanese suicide." Home was making life impossible for her. He had driven her out of Europe, and now was driving her out of the United States; she had nothing left to do but start for Australia and change her name forever. But, and here she turned at bay, if Home did not hold his tongue—and she gave samples of the unpleasant stories she would tell about him! In her next letter she had decided to go not to Australia but to India, "for very shame and vexation I want to go where no one will know my name. Home's malignity has ruined me forever in Europe."<sup>3</sup> This was probably H.P.B.'s

<sup>3</sup> Solovyoff: *M.P.I.*, p. 278.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

first definite statement of her decision to go to India. It was dated October 2, 1877. She sailed one year later.

### 2. FAREWELL TO AMERICA

(1878)

While Madame had labored over *Isis Unveiled*, the Theosophical Society had expired. The Colonel admitted frankly that "from the close of 1876" on, meetings were discontinued and fees abolished. The influential spiritualists had all resigned, the by-laws were a dead letter.<sup>4</sup> Instead of promoting her Society, Madame, relaxing from long hours at her desk, had established a salon. She was at her best as a hostess and amid the weird shadows and half-lights of the Lamasery she had gathered about her a spontaneous and often witty group representing the arts, sciences, professions, and every phase of occultism. The only difficulty was that a salon brought in no dues and contributed nothing toward paying the butcher and baker. With *Isis* off her hands, she could no longer dodge the issue. She made several efforts to join forces with established secret societies, hoping to wangle a paid position, however humble, and trusting to her ingenuity to work her way up. She consulted eminent Rosicrucians and Freemasons, but found them unenthusiastic. The trouble was that she had nothing to offer except a name, a cloak of secrecy, and a short list of ex-members.

When H.P.B. had exhausted the esoteric resources of America, she turned to the Orient. As it happened, it was her partner who established the first contact with India during the winter of 1877-8. An old friend of Olcott's, James M. Peebles, returning from a trip around the world, called at the Lamasery and happened to recognize a photograph of a Hindu, Moolji Thackersey, in a group picture hanging on the wall. Olcott had met Thackersey when crossing the

<sup>4</sup> Olcott: *O.D.L.*, I, 331.

## NECROMANCY, INC.

Atlantic in 1870. Peebles, just back from Bombay, also knew him, and gave Olcott his address. The Colonel wrote to the Hindu the very next day, and Thackersey in turn introduced him by letter to the Swami Dayanand Saraswati, one of the great figures of nineteenth-century India. At that time still unknown even in his own country, the Swami was in the midst of creating the Arya Samaj, a reform movement that has exerted a powerful influence against Hinduism's worst abuses, the caste system and cruel customs affecting women. The Swami exhorted Hindus to reform, not by copying the west, but by reviving pride in their own culture; he sought to restore the purity of the ancient Hindu tradition with the cry "Back to the Vedas," recalling Luther's "Back to the Bible."

The Swami's thesis fitted in neatly with H.P.B.'s nostalgia for the past. She liked to jeer at modern scientists, insisting that the alchemists and necromancers of old anticipated most of their discoveries and more, for she credited them with a vast body of arcane knowledge and occult power that has been virtually lost to mankind for several centuries. It was her purpose to revive this knowledge. She put something of all this into Olcott's first letter to the Swami, addressing him, though he was only seven years her senior, in a flow of rhetoric: "You venerable man who have learned to pierce the disguises and masks of your fellow creatures, look into our hearts and see that we speak the truth. . . ."

When an interpreter read the letter to the Swami—he did not understand English—he was gratified to discover in far-off America a friend who was also groping toward a revival of ancient Hinduism. He responded courteously to these advances, and H.P.B. threw herself headlong into a public alliance with this unknown Oriental and his unknown organization. In his second letter, the Swami gravely consented to H.P.B.'s proposal to amalgamate her Society with the Arya Samaj. She had a cut made of the Swami's signature with its Sanskrit pothooks and ordered a new mem-

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

bership certificate, signed by the Swami and bearing the inscription:

### THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY OF THE ARYA SAMAJ

Early in April 1878, on the heels of Olcott's first letter to the Swami, H.P.B. suffered one of those hysterical attacks which she was beginning to utilize as supernatural visitations. It followed the pattern of the Philadelphia seizure three years earlier. She lost consciousness one morning while sitting at her desk and lay in a trance for five days. The Colonel and his sister, Mrs. Mitchell, gave her up as dead, and were about to bury her when they received a telegram from a Master in Bombay: "Fear nothing, she is neither dead nor ill, but she had need of repose." This telegram was supposed to mark the beginning of the transfer of authority from the Egyptian Brotherhood of Luxor to the hierarchy of Indian Masters or Mahatmas. Unfortunately, the Colonel's memoirs failed to mention this memorable illness and receipt of the first message from a Mahatma, which suggests that the entire incident, as related by sister Vera<sup>5</sup> was another of Madame's afterthoughts. However, it made a popular legend.

By the summer of 1878, H.P.B. was concentrating all her efforts on the move to India. Exile from the United States was costing Olcott a painful wrench, and she prepared to force his hand. A year earlier, in July 1877, she had had the skeleton Society go through the form of authorizing the transfer of the organization's headquarters to whatever foreign country might seem expedient. Now she took an odd precaution. She agreed to pay the expenses of an English man and woman to India: she feared that English officials in India might suspect them as spies, and English people in their party would disarm suspicion. It seemed an expensive and unnecessary gesture to Olcott, but she overrode his protests.

<sup>5</sup> *Lucifer*, November 1894.

## NECROMANCY, INC.

The Englishman, E. Wimbridge, artist and architect, had an impressive manner, and made himself so agreeable that H.P.B. invited him to stay at the Lamasery until they sailed, giving him the Baron's old room. Olcott used to wander off to bed at midnight, leaving them to discuss mysteries until far into the morning. They found relaxation in innocent summer outings. Olcott hired a carriage and team of horses and H.P.B. with her two men drove the dozen miles to the Long Island shore. She was grossly fat by this time, and made a grotesque figure, her skirt wopsed up above her knees, paddling in her bare feet on the beach while the men went swimming.

Rosa Bates, the Englishwoman, an acidulous ex-governess in her late thirties, was not accepted on such intimate terms. Olcott prophesied that she would be a troublemaker, but she was English, which was all that interested H.P.B. at the moment.

Getting ready to leave America forever, Madame Blavatsky took the trouble to become an American citizen on July 8, 1878, the very day that her five years residence made her eligible. It was a strange thing to do. Beneath all the layers of cynicism and disillusionment, H.P.B. had one vulnerable spot, one throbbing vein of sentiment, a passionate love of Russia. She admitted to her aunt her distaste for the whole proceedings. It had been a dreadful day, she wrote; she resented the wording of our oath of allegiance and had choked with emotion when she had to renounce obedience to the Emperor of Russia, feeling herself an apostate and political renegade, "I was awfully scared when pronouncing this blackguardly recantation." Her American citizenship turned out a fortunate precaution, however, when, as she had anticipated, she was suspected by the British of being a Russian spy.

During H.P.B.'s last days in the United States a forlorn echo reached her of the man she had jilted. She was served with final papers in the Betanelly divorce suit, but she gave

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

them scant attention, for she had concentrated on one purpose, uprooting the Colonel, and she was not yet confident of success. Months in advance, by order of the Brothers, she reserved passage to England for December 17, and Olcott was bombarded with supernatural messages, letters, postscripts, memoranda written into his diary in red and blue pencil, reiterating that his fate to all eternity depended upon his being ready to sail on the appointed date. Their similarity to the old Gerry Brown messages did not seem to occur to Olcott.

The financing of this expedition has never been explained. Passage for four adults, second class, New York to Bombay via England, with stopovers and incidentals must have cost about \$1,500. Add to this a year's living expenses for four, plus the overhead of their Theosophical magazine before it began to show a profit. Olcott would scarcely have tried to borrow from his wife's family, as Serapis suggested. A bequest from the Baron de Palm is the most probable explanation. After the auction of their Lamasery furnishings, H.P.B. wrote in Olcott's diary a cryptic message: "All our things went for a song as they say in America . . . Everything gone; Baron de Palm, adieu." The Baron had been dead nearly four years, yet it was to him and not to Wilder or General Lippitt or Sotheran, that Madame bade farewell.

All down the years, wherever H.P.B. found herself, she soon had several Colonels and Generals in her train. One of the *habitués* of the Lamasery had been Major General Abner W. Doubleday, U. S. Army, retired, who had a distinguished war record, and was besides the inventor of the modern American game of baseball. He now permitted her to use his name as President of the American section of the Theosophical Society, for she was resolved to keep the Society in existence, if only on paper, to serve as a unit in an international organization.

In December, after a series of farewell parties, Madame

## NECROMANCY, INC.

hired an auctioneer to dispose of the Lamasery, the dusty curios and properties that had helped to make her famous. She had shipped her books by freight, and Miss Bates had been sent ahead with the trunks, leaving H.P.B. and her men to follow unencumbered. But when it came to parting with the cuckoo clock, the stuffed owl, the serpent, all her secret props, Madame's courage failed, and the pile of luggage mounted steadily higher. They sorted and packed until four in the morning on the day of the auction and had scarcely fallen asleep when the maid was pounding on the back door. H.P.B. rushed off in the rain to meet an Adept at the Battery, very secret, could not talk about it, but it gave her an excuse to miss the auction.

A journalist friend wrote a pathetic little piece in the New York *Herald* about the auctioneer's red flag drooping forlornly in the rain at the Lamasery door while they tore to pieces "one of the best known and most remarkable places of social resort in New York city." These newspaper reporters sounded a note of genuine sadness as they waved *bon voyage*, but it was mixed with honest bafflement. A New York *Times* man wrote that two years of closest study by a trained reporter had failed to convince him that Madame was either a self-deluded fraud or that her seeing powers were genuine. "All sober-minded people will deny that she wrought miracles and yet scores will swear that she did." <sup>6</sup>

At last the auction was over, and everything was gone. Only the ugly brass chandelier remained and its flickering gas lights, which had so often been turned low for weird and ghostly effects. It had witnessed many strange scenes, miracles, marvels, tantrums. Whimsically, H.P.B. had admitted it to partnership, expanding the Theosophical Twins to the Theosophical Trinity, and it figured on December 17, 1878, in the final entry in Olcott's diary before leaving America: "At near midnight H.S.O. and H.P.B.

<sup>6</sup> *New York Times*, January 2, 1885.



### *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

took leave of the chandelier and drove off in a carriage to the steamer."

#### 3. FOOT OF THE RAINBOW

(1878-9)

It was farewell to America forever. Madame Blavatsky's reasons for leaving this country were as confused as the motives that had brought her here—and very similar. They were an itching foot and an inability to face humiliation—in this case, the attacks in D. D. Home's new book. As yet she made no pretensions to special powers or relations with supernatural beings; such claims were afterthoughts written into scrapbooks and inspired memoirs in later years. Eager as she was to impress the Swami, she said nothing to him about any residence in Tibet or about her Masters; she claimed only a knowledge of such scraps of occultism as she had picked up in childhood from wandering Siberian shamans, probably some simple conjuring tricks.

The choice of India may have been partly due to the circumstance of Colonel Olcott's correspondence with Moolji Thackersey, but it also clarifies Madame's state of mind. At this time she accepted the mysterious-East legends and the miraculous powers of Indian yogis as credulously as the rest of the world; secretly she was hoping to gain the confidence of some real Hindu adepts, learn their secrets, and use them to improve her own amateurish legerdemain for the greater glory of her Theosophical Society. As a contributory motive, she wanted to isolate Colonel Olcott from his family and associates, to insure against his deserting her in a moment of disillusionment or rebellion. Boston was not far enough away. India was better. Most of all, she craved this new adventure with the intensity of a lifetime's habit of running away from things. Her years of footloose wandering called her to escape once more from the disappointments of today into a magical tomorrow where anything may happen. And yet, through all the hectic weeks

## NECROMANCY, INC.

of preparation, she struggled against a choking fear. Age was creeping on. She could not shut out the haunting question: If this fails, what next?

Madame's steamer was, to her despair, held up from midnight until the following noon by the tides of the lower bay. So many things could happen: Mrs. Olcott might come over the side with a legal summons to detain her eloping spouse; the Colonel might break down at the last minute and refuse to desert his three sons. H.P.B. shut herself in her stateroom, trembling and sweating in uncontrollable fear; almost apologetic for once, she told Olcott that "the body is difficult to manage." After an eternity of waiting, on December 18, 1878, the pilot took them across Sandy Hook and they were off.

Although the journey was more expensive by way of England, H.P.B. wanted to visit London. It may be the repression of the English temperament that makes Englishmen especially susceptible to spiritualism and Theosophy. No other country has produced a comparable group of devotees among the intellectuals, titles, and socialites, or can match such names as Sir Oliver Lodge, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Stainton Moses, and Annie Besant. Before leaving for distant India, H.P.B. wanted to arouse the personal interest of the London branch of the Theosophical Society, which had formally joined the parent organization in New York the preceding year. An English group of the right sort behind her would be particularly useful in India.

In spite of her attacks on the vicious practices of mediums, H.P.B. and the Colonel were guests in London of an American medium, Mrs. Mary Hollis Billing, late of New York City and favorably known on both sides of the ocean for the sprightly messages conveyed by her control, Ski. H.P.B.'s first objective was to impress C. C. Massey, President of the English branch. Mr. Massey, who was a handsome young barrister, a university man of good family, and an active spiritualist, was invited to dinner at the home

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

of Mrs. Billing. At an appropriate moment the conversation turned to tea-drinking, and H.P.B. nonchalantly "materialized" a Japanese teapot from under the table. Massey was mildly impressed.

This was a mere beginning. Madame dominated the evening, eyes shining, beautiful hands in constant motion, rolling cigarettes, snubbing them out, making ineffable gestures. She told them in confidence that the Arya Samaj was vastly more than a social reform organization: reform was a blind to conceal its secret purpose. The Swami Dayanand, the greatest Adept in all the world, was to be her guru (teacher). He had sent for her and was going to reveal the secrets of occultism. Through her he might consent to teach others in the Western world who proved eligible for initiation. As Massey was leaving, H.P.B. told him to put his hand in his overcoat pocket. He brought out an ornately carved sandalwood cardcase; opening it, he found the autograph of Hurrychund Chintamon, President of the Bombay branch of the Arya Samaj. Not only the Swami, but even his chelas had the power to perform miracles; Hurrychund had materialized this friendly greeting across the ocean. This time Massey was fascinated.

The human need to believe in the supernatural is evidenced by the universal folklore of fairies, goblins, and ghosts. Even today in our comic strips, epitome of popular appeal, Superman is a materialistic version of H.P.B.'s Mahatmas, using the same exaggerated faculties, X-ray eyes, and supernormal speed and strength. All children and primitives believe in magic, a tendency that is repressed by our civilization. The amazing appeal of H.P.B. lay in her plausibly confirming those childhood wishes, which most of us have learned to conceal and forget. Massey began the evening in a cautious mood. By midnight he had abandoned himself with almost sensuous delight to a trusting acceptance of her bewitching fantasies. She had an important advantage in dealing with a man like Massey: he had implicit

## NECROMANCY, INC.

confidence in her good faith. It was impossible to imagine a woman with her frank, fearless gaze and noble sentiments stooping to the vulgar tricks of charlatans. Massey was a Victorian gentleman, and he took it for granted that he and she lived by the same code.

This London visit in early January 1879 witnessed a new departure in H.P.B.'s use of phenomena. She had cautiously limited most of her earlier efforts to small select groups on her own premises. She now undertook to exploit the mystification appeal on a progressive scale that would set the whole world talking. A bewildering succession of marvels ensued. Olcott and Wimbridge walking down the street in a fog (!) were told on their return home that they had passed an Egyptian Brother on his way to see H.P.B.; the two men had visited Mme Tussaud's Wax Works, where, under the left foot of figure 158, as instructed by H.P.B., they found a cryptic message from another Egyptian Brother. Mrs. Billing and Ski were docile confederates, corroborating anything and everything. H.P.B. shrewdly judged that Olcott would not relish such a part, and she did not take him behind the scenes then or later. Instead, he served as a fairly innocent capper, helping to convince the skeptical by his own delight and amazement.

In spite of her apparent success, H.P.B. was still struggling against an oppressive sense of evil omen. As she set sail from Liverpool, she dispatched a frightened farewell to her sister: Providence only knew what was in store for her, she would write from Bombay—if she ever reached there—timid words for one traveling on a mission for the Brotherhood of Luxor.

Early on the morning of February 16, 1879, H.P.B. found herself at last encircled by the magnificent panorama of Bombay harbor: mysterious Elephanta, the handsome bungalows and flower gardens and strips of green of Malabar Hill, and, close at hand, the pseudoclassic formality of the Apollo Bunder, the British entrance to India. The wel-

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

come was disappointing. Olcott's old acquaintance, Moolji Thackersey, and two friends boarded the steamer to greet them, but the Arya Samaj was notably absent. The Swami Dayanand was touring northern India. The President of the Bombay branch, Hurrychund Chintamon, whose card-case Massey had found in his pocket, was also missing.

Thriftily seeking to avoid the expense of hotel bills for his party of four, Olcott had commissioned Hurrychund to rent a modest house and have a staff of servants awaiting their arrival. In his absence there was no way of knowing what arrangements he had made. Frustrated, the Colonel's party longed for some word or sign, but H.P.B.'s adepts, who read minds half way round the world, offered no assistance. The best they could do was to dispatch an ordinary coolie on his two legs with a chit to Hurrychund's address on the far side of Bombay. The coolie departed, and they stood in the hot sun, very forlorn. An apologetic Hurrychund finally appeared. He had been late, an Indian custom, and had missed the bunder boat, which carried welcoming parties to the steamer. Taking the next one, he passed the Theosophists coming in, and they had to wait while Hurrychund's boat carried him out to the steamer and back. The contretemps seemed incongruous for a near-Adept who could slip a gift into a dinner guest's pocket with perfect timing at a distance of three thousand miles.

H.P.B. had been around enough to know that the Swami's absence and their casual reception were not mere accidents. Imperialism exacted from the India of the 1870's an obsequious attentiveness to white prestige. H.P.B. arrived without the proper credentials, and India was aware of the fact. She met her host affably enough. After all, she had reached India, Mother of Mysteries. A new field opened out, offering unlimited opportunity to anyone clever enough to exploit it. She smiled tolerantly at Olcott when, as he stepped ashore, he solemnly knelt and kissed the sacred soil of Mother India.

## CHAPTER IX



### *WEST GOES EAST*

(1879)

NEARLY four centuries after Ponce de Leon had sailed from the old world to the new, searching for the secret of eternal youth, Madame Blavatsky sailed from the new world to the old in pursuit of the secrets of occultism. Both were disappointed in their quest.

Guided by Hurrychund, H.P.B. and her party were loaded into tongas and driven across town, past the crowded bazaars into the swarming Hindu quarter of the city. H.P.B. claimed to have seen it all before, but Olcott, the impressionable Yankee, and Wimbridge, the artist, always remembered that first drive from the office buildings and stores of downtown Bombay into the heart of the gorgeous East. A fretwork of carved balconies and sagging wooden sunhoods enclosed as in a frame the riotous color of the swarming streets. Importantly, Hurrychund ushered the party, followed by a line of coolies loaded with luggage, through a forlorn compound into an untidy, scantily furnished house. They learned later that it was his own house, hastily vacated for their benefit. It had no running water, no plumbing, no kitchen stove, none of the conveniences the West

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

takes for granted, but H.P.B. cheerfully accepted this plunge into the simple life.

The newcomers were welcomed on the evening of February 17, 1879, at a reception in Hurrychund's photographic studio next door. Garlands were hung about their necks, they were sprinkled with rose water, and an address of welcome inscribed upon a scroll was read aloud and presented to them. The welcome continued for a week. They witnessed the rites celebrating the anniversary of Shivaratri in the caves of Elephanta across the harbor. They attended a performance in their honor of the Hindu drama *Sitaram* at the Elphinstone Theatre. They were seated in a box, garlanded with jasmine and roses, and served rich, sticky sweets. When they rose to leave, the performance stopped while Hurrychund read an address of welcome from the stage.

It was all very idyllic until Hurrychund presented his bill. In addition to an exorbitant rental, he had charged them for his cablegram of greeting, for the three hundred chairs and the refreshments used at the welcoming reception in his studio, for every expense attending their arrival. This was especially chilling in view of H.P.B.'s generous gesture: before leaving New York she had forwarded to Hurrychund a gift of two hundred dollars presented on behalf of the members of the Theosophical Society in America to their brethren of the Arya Samaj in Bombay. At the first meeting of the Samaj after their arrival, Madame Blavatsky, questioning Hurrychund, exposed the fact that he had pocketed the money and failed to report its receipt to anyone. It was a very stormy session.

The great Swami about whom H.P.B. had committed herself so recklessly was also a source of embarrassment. When, after several months, H.P.B. realized that he was not coming to Bombay to offer even a belated welcome, she hastily decided to move the mountain to Mohammed. Learning that he would be in Saharanpur toward the end

## WEST GOES EAST

of April, she planned an itinerary of the Karli caves and the Taj Mahal timed to bring her to Saharanpur at the same time. She took with her the Colonel, his friend Moolji Thackersey, and her personal servant, Babula.

On those early journeys H.P.B. made no secret of her eager search for Hindu holy men, adepts who would teach her how to produce supernatural phenomena. Artlessly and persistently, she and Olcott asked to be directed to yogis skilled in wonder-working. They were surprised and disappointed when the sannyasis disdained their advances and professed ignorance of other wonder-workers. Only the jugglers and snake charmers seemed flattered and responsive to their interest. On the eve of her journey to meet the Swami, H.P.B. began a series of adventures in magic ranging from simple letters from the Brothers to elaborate illusions in which an entire house and compound seemed to disappear from its site. The phenomena continued throughout the trip: in the Caves ghostly voices startled them with warnings; unknown messengers handed them notes, bouquets, a lacquered box of *pan sopari* (betel leaf and spices, an Indian delicacy). Instead of the dried autumn leaves and stuffed animals of the Lamasery, H.P.B. found herself in a world of exotic settings with props scattered all over the landscape, and she responded prodigally. For years Olcott considered this first trip of March–April 1879 proof of his partner's powers, assuming that she had not had time to arrange for confederates so soon after their arrival. But in the end he learned that with the connivance of his friend Thackersey, H.P.B. had secretly engaged an extra servant, Baburao, who accompanied them on the journey, but kept out of his sight.

On their arrival at Saharanpur, H.P.B. avoided questions of precedence and white prerogatives versus Hindu holiness by dispatching Olcott immediately to pay his respects. An hour later the Swami returned the compliment. H.P.B. was staying in a dak bungalow, a wayside shelter for travelers



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

that takes the place of a village inn in upcountry India. She had long anticipated this meeting and knew just what she wanted to discuss: magic, phenomena, yogis, and how much power they really had. The Swami, after stating his views on God and nirvana, soon reverted to his main theme, Back-to-the-Vedas, and his plans for restoring India to the Indians through a revival of their ancient culture. It was H.P.B.'s first meeting with one of the great Indian ascetics, and she watched him closely. She was handicapped by his not speaking English; her technique suffered at the hands of an interpreter, and she was disappointed by the meeting. It was apparent that the Swami did not take her too seriously, and the conversation had been worlds away from the esoteric secrets she had hoped to discuss. After her advance notices it was a sad anti-climax.

Perhaps by way of compensation, Olcott, crossing the plains of Rajputana on his way home, received an important recognition by the Brothers. At the end of a day's journey the two Founders had stopped in the dak bungalow of the village of Bhurtpur. They were sitting on the veranda in the twilight when an old Hindu came around the corner of the bungalow, salaamed to Olcott, and handed him a chit. Written in the pompous style supposedly affected by divinities, the letter, which was signed by the Master Morya, sought to reassure Olcott by telling him that he was on the right path and that the surest way to find the Mahatmas was through faithful work for the Theosophical Society.

In the end Olcott questioned the authenticity of most of the numerous messages that he had received from the hierarchy, but he cherished this letter, his first recognition after making the great plunge, and he wrote in his last years that "even though the letter had been a false one, it has proved a blessing and a perpetual comfort in times of trouble."<sup>1</sup> H.P.B.'s faults were so flashy and picturesque that

<sup>1</sup> Olcott: *O.D.L.*, II, 71.

## WEST GOES EAST

they formed a glittering screen, overshadowing her real power and ability. The capacity to write and speak words that bring comfort to aching hearts, words to which men cling for hope, is a rare gift, and incongruous as it may seem, it was one source of H.P.B.'s power.

Olcott's brief honeymoon with the Mahatmas was followed by an extremely painful period. He thought he had suffered in tearing from his heart the ties that bound him to home and family. But during those early months in India he experienced anguish exceeding anything he had ever known. He could have accepted H.P.B.'s alibis in half a dozen cases, but nothing seemed to work out. Bemused though he was, the Colonel must have noted the irony of the fall of Hurrychund from a darling of the gods to a petty swindler who gouged them on the rent and pocketed their rupees. And how explain the contrast between the Swami Dayanand, glittering Master of All Mysteries as H.P.B. had drawn him on that expansive evening at Mrs. Billing's dinner party, and the austere patriot and reformer of Saharanpur? Olcott grappled with soul-shaking doubts in an extremity of confusion, much as our ancestors used to agonize over the comparative merits of salvation by faith and by works.

Was this fascinating woman the agent of supernatural powers or was she an impostor? With the beginning of hot weather, virtually all the other Europeans had escaped to the hill stations. Many times in the heat and rain and steaming smells, Olcott thought back regretfully to New York City, his sons, his work, his friends, a frosted mint julep at the Lotos Club. With characteristic frankness he told H.P.B. that their Indian expedition had been the "act of lunatics" and that they had an excellent chance of starving to death.

Madame was in no mood for such talk. She herself was too frightened. She too could see this party of four with their small cash reserve melting away and not a practical

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

plan for the future among them. Like a mother who calls on Dad to administer the spankings, H.P.B. used her hierarchy to punish the fainthearted.

The Master Morya addressed the Colonel with an icy severity that must have made his teeth chatter even in Bombay. Miss Bates and Mr. Wimbridge might justifiably complain: they were outsiders who had been induced to come along. But the Colonel had no right to such regrets. He had been a prime mover in promoting the expedition! It should be enough for him to know that they were here on the direct orders of our beloved Lord and Chief, the Maha Sahib, whom he had formerly called Serapis. The letter ended as abruptly as it began, tossing him an unpleasant taunt about his family in America. In later letters the Master warned him even more angrily that he was alienating the woman to whom he owed everything and upon whom all hope of further progress in occultism depended. "Perish the thought rather than be ungrateful to H.P.B." <sup>2</sup>

On the surface the Founders kept themselves occupied. They had moved on March 7, 1879, into a bungalow on Girgaum Back Road, for which they paid less than half the rental charged by Hurrychund. H.P.B. handed over the housekeeping and supervision of the numerous Indian servants to Miss Bates. Wimbridge made himself useful and helped with the Indian callers, members of the Arya Samaj who were attracted by the novelty of meeting respectable Europeans on terms of equality, and were also surprised and flattered by H.P.B.'s outspoken admiration for their ancient civilization.

Madame was genuine in her hospitality. The Eastern strain in her blood (she used to call herself half Oriental) gave her a natural interest in Asiatic culture. She also had practical considerations in mind: if she expected to build her Society into a source of income she must cultivate a constituency. Brief residence in India had given her an in-

<sup>2</sup> *Letters M.W.*, II, 84.

## WEST GOES EAST

sight into the low level of Indian morale and had suggested her opportunity. It was less than twenty years since the Mutiny, and the British Raj was still jumpy; many repressive measures continued in force and the Indians were thoroughly intimidated. Madame had anticipated that a western woman championing Hindu culture would make a sensation and that the flattered Hindus would flock to her support. On reaching India, however, she realized that its population of three hundred million was not, for her purposes, as large as it sounded. The masses of Indian peasants were illiterate and lived on one meal a day. Even the wages of the small white-collar class were too low to permit them to offer financial support for a nonessential like Theosophy. Her only hope was to cultivate the rajahs and the few wealthy Indians.

Almost at once she secured two promising disciples: Prince Harisinghi Rupsinghji of Bhavnagar, who made many generous gifts through the years; and Damodar K. Mavalankar, impressionable, mystical son of wealthy Brahmins. Damodar's father, Keshava, also an early member of the Society, became alarmed by the scale of his son's gifts to H.P.B., and decided that she was a charlatan out for the money. Although he threatened to disinherit his son, he was unable to interfere with the boy's intense devotion to his new guru.

Those early months in India were a bleak time for the Founders. The Colonel had secured agencies for several American exporting firms and tried to organize a business, shipping to the States bundles of tiger skins, carved ivory, and curios, and trying to dispose of American manufactured articles such as alarm clocks. Breaking into the business without backing, connections, or experience, he met little success. On the Fourth of July 1879, as the Colonel patriotically noted, the Founders decided to risk their small remaining capital on a magazine with H.P.B. as editor and the Colonel as business manager. It was an immediate success.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

The first number appeared on September 30, the edition of four hundred copies was sold out in a few days. Each month they cautiously increased their printing order. After only four months they turned the corner, and the magazine began to show a profit, becoming a steady money-maker. A chatty, intimate note of congratulations from the Master Morya to Olcott indicated the gratification of the Mahatmas. It was balm to Olcott's wounds and made him very happy. Even in far-away Tibet the Masters could relax on hearing the reassuring tinkle of the silver rupees.

### 2. LION TAMER

( 1880 )

"Hurrah for the heathen Hindu!" exclaimed H.P.B. on receiving the Swami Dayanand's assent to the amalgamation of Theosophists and Arya Samaj. She arrived in India still hurrahing for the Hindus, but with a chip on her shoulder for the British. Those were the palmy days of imperialism, and it was a strong brew. The majority of British civil service and army officials were incorruptible, competent, hard-working administrators. On the human side, however, they held themselves aloof with an arrogance that was peculiarly insulting. No one who has known the charming people of England on their native heath can imagine, without experiencing it, the insidious effect of the white man's burden.

Confronting Imperial India with an arrogance of her own, Madame Blavatsky did not bother her head about white authority. She was a law unto herself. If she liked a thing, good; if not, to Hades with it! Perversely she ignored and affronted the all-powerful British community. She lived in the Hindu quarter, neglected to leave cards at Government House, deliberately attacked cherished traditions. She surpassed her New York record of getting off on the wrong foot.

Interviewed by the Bombay press on her arrival, she de-

## WEST GOES EAST

fied two basic taboos, managing to tread on all the most important white toes in India before she was fairly ashore. Her smouldering antagonism to Christianity had been fanned into flame by the sanctimonious piety of a group of missionaries on shipboard. While extolling the merits of Hindu culture to the ship-news men, she could not resist taking a slap at Christianity and the missionaries, receiving some sour repartee from the missionary press in return. Within three months, she threatened to sue the Presbyterian Marathi Mission for libel. The missionary editor apologized and lost the first round, but he failed to turn the other cheek. A few years later the missionaries took full revenge.

Madame's second *faux pas* was even more serious. She had made her entrance declaiming the Hindu classics calling upon Indians to take pride in their past and revive their ancient culture. The English community did not like it; they did not know what she was talking about, but it did not sound right. With the exception of occasional scholars in their ranks, the average British administrators live in India, ignorant of and indifferent to everything in the country except their specific job and British associates. Englishwomen, having no public jobs, intensify this spirit. The wife of an English colonel being initiated into the Theosophical Society met Damodar and other Hindu chelas and was amazed by their intelligence, though most of them were college graduates. She told H.P.B. that she had lived in the country for eighteen years and had never before spoken to any Indian except her servants and tradesmen. England in India dismissed H.P.B.'s genuine interest in Hinduism as cheap demagoguery.

The C. I. D. (Criminal Investigation Department, corresponding to our F. B. I.) took a very different attitude, giving H.P.B. serious consideration. This much was routine; every newcomer to India is quietly investigated, and in case of doubt authority takes appropriate action. H.P.B. was

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

listed as a suspicious person. On her trip to the Karli caves she discovered that detectives were following her. She flew at them on station platforms, shouting taunts and making scenes. Back in Bombay, Colonel Olcott made formal protest, but in vain; the police refused to call off their shadows. H.P.B.'s apparently fantastic threat against herself of three years earlier had come true. She was under surveillance as a Russian spy.

H.P.B.'s blundering lack of finesse might well have cost her deportation, instead of which Fate played into her hand—or, as she would say, the Mahatmas intervened. During her first fortnight in India she heard from a top-rank journalist, A. P. Sinnett, editor of the *Allahabad Pioneer*, the most important English paper in India, unofficially accepted as spokesman for the Raj. Sinnett, who had dabbled in spiritualism in London, had still another reaction to H.P.B.'s blustering announcement of her arrival. He gave her a friendly notice in the *Pioneer* and wrote inviting her to notify him of any interesting developments. He became her most important convert in India. Through him she could reach practically anyone right up to the Viceroy; she had won at the outset entrée to the "*pukka sahibs*."

In December 1879, at the end of their first year in India, the Founders visited the Sinnetts in Allahabad. H.P.B. defensively warned them that she was "a rough old hippopotamus of a woman," and listed her bad habits as was her wont. Like the Corsons, the Sinnetts were unprepared for the actual H.P.B. She joined her correct host and hostess in the morning wearing a dingy red dressing gown, spotted and greasy, her fingers yellow with nicotine. When annoyed, she turned on Olcott with noisy tirades, regardless of who was present, ripping out her phrases with Elizabethan unconcern, using words, shuddered Sinnett "that we should all have preferred her not to make use of."

The Sinnetts could overlook H.P.B.'s queer clothes and untidy habits, but her tantrums and billingsgate gave them

## WEST GOES EAST

gooseflesh. And yet H.P.B. had something that Sinnett supremely wanted. Susceptibility to the lure of occultism transcends practical considerations. It is like the enviable, pitiful blindness of young love. In spite of embarrassing moments, the visit was far from a failure, as was proved by an invitation to spend most of the following hot weather with the Sinnetts at Simla, summer capital of the government of India and of its social life. Campaigns for personal advancement, political and financial intrigues, international spy plots, innocent and less innocent flirtations, all come to maturity on Simla's dizzy heights.

On a September morning of 1880, Madame and the Colonel clambered out of the northbound Mail at Umballa (remember Kim?), nearest rail point to Simla. Importantly, Madame's bearer, Babula, supervised half a dozen coolies transferring the elaborate luggage of travelling sahibs in the Orient: tin trunks—to keep out ants—tiffin basket, bottled soda water, bedding rolls, all disappeared into the boot of a dak-gharry, Eastern equivalent of a stage coach. H.P.B. was excited, talking, gesturing, laughing noisily. She had just come from another encounter with Swami Dayanand.

The Swami was absorbed in his great reform movement, which was progressing favorably. H.P.B. had been forced to make all the advances, and she found the Swami courteous but noncommittal. Even Olcott noticed his chilly concentration as he watched Madame demonstrate her phenomena. The Swami probably saw more than she was aware. Anticipating possible embarrassment, he handled her most discreetly, inviting the entire membership of the local Arya Samaj to attend this meeting, which H.P.B. had requested on her way to Simla. Although confidences were thus precluded, she persisted in cross-questioning the Swami about supernormal phenomena, and the power of adepts; what, specifically could they do, how did they develop power, what did he think of the Yoga discipline? The



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

Swami, absorbed in his reforms, had little interest in the claptrap of phenomena, but he replied carefully. There were three kinds of phenomena: the lowest, depending on sleight of hand, he called *tamasha*, meaning mere show or pretense; a second group was helped along by chemical or mechanical devices; only a small third group was genuine, produced by the occult power of man. The Swami emphasized the lifetime of strict discipline required in order to develop occult power: in addition to observing the well-known ascetic rules of diet, chastity, and meditation, five human weaknesses must be subjugated: ignorance, egotism, sensual passion, selfishness, and fear of death. Blind absorption in her own purposes left H.P.B. unabashed by her unfitness to meet such standards.

Supporting his partner's effort to pin the Swami down, the Colonel described some of Madame's recent manifestations: causing a shower of roses to fall in the palace of the Maharajah of Benares, ringing invisible bells, diminishing the flame of a lamp to the vanishing point and bringing it up again without touching the lamp. How would the Swami classify such phenomena? The Swami answered cautiously: these were phenomena of Yoga, though they might be imitated by tricksters and then would be mere *tamasha*.<sup>3</sup> It was not a cordial reply, but at least he had not denounced her, and she could make her own interpretation.

The Founders resumed their journey. Leaning back on the dak-gharry cushions, they discussed the Swami as they climbed the foothills of the Himalayas through the fragrant darkness. H.P.B. was careful not to let the Colonel see her disappointment. In the intimacy of the tropical night under oath of secrecy, she told him that he had been talking face to face with one of the Elect of the Universe. He was no ordinary Swami; as a matter of fact, one of her Masters had condescended to occupy the Hindu's body. The Swami Dayanand was one of the Mahatmas! So secret

<sup>3</sup> Olcott: *O.D.L.*, II, 222.

## WEST GOES EAST

was her own relationship with him that they maintained the appearance of casual acquaintances even before their chelas; only when they were alone together could they unmask. The Colonel listened in an ecstasy with the eager, uncritical faith of a child. Hours such as this satisfied some overpowering craving in the man, and compensated for all that he had sacrificed, for his anomalous position, for the constant humiliation he must endure.

Pausing on their climb of 7,000 feet for a five-hour rest at Kalka, they changed from the dak-gharry to tongas, low-hung, two wheeled carts. All day they zigzagged, passing an endless line of traffic headed down the mountain for the burning plains they had just quitted, bullock carts, camel caravans, government elephants, strings of polo ponies led by Mohammedan horse traders. Overhead, monkeys chattered in the deodars. They saw the flashing green and scarlet of parrot's wings, heard the clang of tonga horns; now and again as they rounded a sharp spur they saw a magnificent vista of the plains through the steaming haze of hot-weather India. At the outskirts of the city one of the Sinnett servants met them, impeccably turned out in white dhoti and three-quarter-length white coat with scarlet turban and cummerbund. Deferentially he supervised their transfer from the cramped tongas to jampans, sedan chairs swinging from long poles carried on the shoulder of four coolies.

After dinner they stood on the veranda looking out over magical Simla. The recitative of the bazaars floated up the hillside past them, accented by the syncopation of Oriental drums and triangle, their haunting 1-2-3 rhythm drifting to them from across distant ravines. Lights were everywhere, the sky blazing with stars, twinkling torches in the bazaars and along the winding roads. Even H.P.B. was moved. Simla stirred her deeply. It was refreshing to return to the easy give and take, the tonic self-confidence of her kind. In spite of having ostracized herself, she wanted now to be re-established among her own sort of people. The Sinnetts

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

sensed her mood; however uncouth, the fact that she was a woman of position and breeding reassured them. After her explosions they shuddered and remembered that her grandmother had been a princess.

The Russian spy charges were very much on Sinnett's mind, for H.P.B. had told him all her troubles during her Allahabad visit, and he knew the real risk of her situation. On her very first morning in Simla, September 8, 1880, Sinnett cornered the Old Lady for a serious talk while she was in a good mood. He begged her to make this visit a real holiday. It was her first break for eighteen months; she owed it to herself to forget Theosophy, phenomena, and the spy charges and relax. It would be the best way to disarm suspicion and convince the Raj that she was harmless.<sup>4</sup>

During the month that Sinnett waited before beginning action, he had the Founders meet the right people, officials, socialites, and a few *literati* like Mr. Kipling whose son Rudyard had gone back to school in England. Sinnett had a newspaper man's awareness that Simla should be ripe, if gently handled, for Madame's picking. The previous Viceroy, Lord Lytton, was a son of Bulwer Lytton, the novelist who had built many of his plots on mystery and magic. Simla society had read *Zanoni*, and was primed with dinner-table small talk about The Dweller and Mejnour and polite occultism.

At the end of the month Olcott addressed a letter to the Secretary in the Foreign Department whom he and Madame had met at dinner on the previous Saturday. By way of credentials Olcott cited the lofty purpose of the Society: to study the religions, philosophies, and sciences of ancient Asia with the help of native scholars and adepts. He referred to their English companions, Wimbridge and Miss Bates. Finally he brought in his own Civil War record, which had entitled him to a special passport and letters of introduction from the President of the United States and

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., II, chaps. xv, xvi.

## WEST GOES EAST

the Secretary of State. It was this last which made an impression. With Sinnett in the background the detectives were called off, but the Raj wrote Olcott that the action was taken "in consequence of the interest expressed in you" by the American heads of state, and they implied that Madame's status would continue to depend upon her good behavior.

Caught up in Simla's gay whirl, Madame with sighs and groans dressed in her best black satin night after night for dinners at home and abroad. At first blasé Simla was delighted with the phenomena that accompanied almost every party. No dinner was complete without an exhibition of the Russian lady's table-rapping and bell-ringing. She even made noises on the bald heads of the chiefs of state, and they seemed to like it.

For a month H.P.B. limited herself to simple parlor tricks. It was no coincidence that on the very day after Olcott received a friendly letter from the Secretary of the Foreign Department, H.P.B. contrived her most spectacular display so far. It required the services of a confederate—she had held Babula in reserve all this time.

On October 3, 1880, the Sinnetts arranged a picnic. They were joined at the last moment by an English judge, who made the seventh in the party. When the servants unpacked the tiffin baskets they found that they had brought only six cups and saucers. In the midst of the laughter and comment, H.P.B., after turning her great seal ring this way and that, pointed to a certain spot and said to one of the party, Major Henderson, Chief of the Indian Police, "Please dig here." Picking up a table knife, the Major dug into the hillock and presently unearthed an extra cup and saucer of the same pattern as those in the tiffin basket. The materialization was received at first with awed delight. After luncheon, however, the Major and the Judge examined the magic spot and found indications that the china might have been deftly poked into the hillock from the far side. In

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

order to clear the matter up, they challenged H.P.B. to repeat the phenomenon under test conditions. She stormily refused and made a scene, berating the men roundly for insulting her by doubting her word. The picnic party went home in a chastened mood. (See Appendix F, page 323.)

But the day was not over. They were dining that night at the home of Allen O. Hume, one of the most distinguished and influential men to come under H.P.B.'s influence. He was the son of Joseph Hume, the fearless reformer who for thirty years served as leader of the House of Commons. Allen Hume, created a Companion of the Bath in recognition of distinguished service during the Mutiny, had just ended nine years in office as Secretary to the Government for the Departments of Agriculture, Revenue, and Commerce. An authority on ornithology, he spent \$100,000 in bringing together in his home, Rothney Castle at Simla, the finest collection and library in the world on his special subject, Asiatic birds. He was also active in promoting Indian self-government and his memory is revered today throughout India as the Father of the Indian National Congress.

On the evening of the miracle-working October third, the Humes were entertaining a dozen guests. At the dinner table Colonel Olcott related the story of the picnic and the cup and saucer, omitting of course the unhappy ending. A discussion of occult phenomena followed. Madame asked Mrs. Hume if there was anything she would particularly like to have, and Mrs. Hume told of losing an old-fashioned brooch set with pearls, with a lock of hair in the back. After dinner, under H.P.B.'s direction, the men fumbled around in a star-shaped flower bed until they found a little packet wrapped in cigarette papers. It was Mrs. Hume's brooch.<sup>5</sup>

Simla was electrified. Momentarily H.P.B. had tamed the British lion. Over the women's tea-cups, over the men's chota pegs, everywhere Madame Blavatsky was discussed. Olcott's discreet account of the cup and saucer materializa-

<sup>5</sup> A. P. Sinnett: *Occult World*, 46-61.

## WEST GOES EAST

tion was supplemented by Major Henderson's story, which questioned H.P.B.'s good faith. You chose the version you liked. But when it came to the brooch, that was total triumph, inexplicable, a miracle!

However, the incident had a damaging sequel. Originally Mrs. Hume had broken the brooch; her daughter gave it to a man friend who was going to Bombay and asked him to take it to a jeweler to be repaired. Instead, he pawned it. The young man knew Madame Blavatsky and was her guest. She secured the ticket, redeemed the brooch and had it mended. The Bombay jeweler, Hormuji Seervai, was found, and testified that he did the work for Madame. Before the end of the month this story was published in *The Bombay Gazette* and other papers. Yet H.P.B. was able to satisfy Sinnett that her phenomenon had been genuine!<sup>6</sup> It was by accepting H.P.B.'s plausible expurgations that Sinnett rendered her a great service. He had no sense of tampering with the facts, for he was yielding to subtle influences: the universal impulse to improve a good story and an overpowering emotional need to believe in Madame. Finally, because he had sponsored her, his reflected glory depended upon hers.

Malicious gossip swirled about Madame. She was a witch; she was possessed by the devil. If only, Sinnett had urged, H.P.B. would take a holiday from her black arts in sophisticated Simla, for too often her tricks were obvious or missed fire. Madame used to insist that she was primarily interested in the metaphysics of Theosophy and had been driven to the use of phenomena by the insatiable appetite of her followers. But it was frequently in defiance of her advisers that she insisted on remaining in the spotlight with her manifestations. Sinnett's efforts to protect her proved that he appreciated her fallibility. At the same time his knowledge strangely failed to interfere with his belief that she offered him a unique opportunity to evade the barriers

<sup>6</sup> J. N. Farquhar: *Modern Religious Movements in India*, p. 229.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

of mortality and come in contact with the supreme powers of the universe.

In spite of jealousy of the Colonel, Sinnett buttonholed him one day for a confidential chat. They were bound in the brotherhood of two men trying to handle a difficult woman. To escape from H.P.B., who had an uncanny way of interrupting them at the wrong moment, they rode down the Mall to the Club. Sinnett told Olcott frankly that he was in despair. He deplored H.P.B.'s inaptitude for her great task; how could the Masters have selected as their sole representative in this world a person so conspicuously lacking in self control, in presentable appearance, in ordinary good manners—all qualities necessary to inspire the confidence of the important people whom Sinnett hoped to interest. With one blast of billingsgate she would destroy in three minutes a prospect on whom he had been working for months. In short, Sinnett wanted to salvage, before she had a chance to wreck it, this unique opportunity which H.P.B. had stumbled over. Olcott let Sinnett talk, and could not help feeling a secret sympathy. But he discreetly kept quiet and offered no suggestions.

In another ten days Sinnett suggested a device of magnificent simplicity, essentially a newspaper man's plan. He proposed that the Brothers deliver to H.P.B. in Simla a copy of the *London Times* as published that same morning in England. It would be an unanswerable piece of evidence. Although H.P.B. was touchy and arbitrary about the Brothers, Sinnett set his heart upon presenting this plan in person. He was secretly convinced that if they could once lay eyes upon him, they must be impressed by his eligibility to become at least Assistant Liaison Manager for the Universe.

One day when H.P.B. was in a good humor Sinnett asked her whether, if he wrote a letter to the Brothers about this plan, she could and would forward it. She accepted the suggestion amiably, and even agreed that he might let Hume into the secret. So began the astral postoffice, one of the

## WEST GOES EAST

most spectacular Theosophical activities. Sinnett received his first letter on October 18, 1880. Madame insisted, and Theosophists believe, that she merely served as a transmitter for the many letters to Sinnett and Hume from the Masters. She disposed of Sinnett's London *Times* proposal with characteristic agility. Precisely because such a test would close the mouths of the skeptics it would not do: the masses were incapable of assimilating the wonders that the Masters were waiting to divulge. Only a small circle of the elite was as yet qualified to receive them. The truth must be doled out in small portions, giving the world time to adjust itself to such revolutionary concepts. One of the first letters through the postoffice was from the Master Koot Hoomi rejecting the suggestion; this ended the matter. One does not argue with a Mahatma.

The Simla visit wound up in a whirl with everything going blue blazes: letters from the Raj about the detectives; letters from Sinnett and Hume for the Masters; letters from the Masters establishing the postoffice, and over all a pyrotechnical display of phenomena that left everyone dazzled and blinking.



## CHAPTER X



### *ENTER THE MAHATMAS*

(1880—2)

ENTERING her second year in India, H.P.B. had still to make some basic readjustments. She had received several letters from Emma Cutting, the Cairo lodginghouse-keeper who lent her money—which she had never returned. Miss Cutting had married a French mechanic named Coulomb, and the two, now destitute in Ceylon, had read press accounts of Theosophy in Bombay. To Madame Coulomb's letters pressing for the return of her loan, H.P.B. replied that she was "poor as a church mouse," but she proposed that the Coulombs should join her in Bombay. They arrived in March 1880.

With the Coulombs came complications. M. Coulomb, clever with tools and a general handyman, fitted in nicely, for H.P.B. always needed a room remodeled or a new cabinet or closet. But Madame Coulomb was a problem. She was an unattractive woman, wrinkled and witchlike, with surly manners and furtive ways. The chelas used to surprise her reading their letters and eavesdropping on conversations. H.P.B. had her own reasons for wanting Madame Coulomb, having taken the woman's measure in Cairo, and

## ENTER THE MAHATMAS

she welcomed this strange creature as her personal friend, letting her trespass on Miss Bates's position as housekeeper. In the absence of the Founders, these newcomers arrogantly took over authority, displaying H.P.B.'s written orders, which conferred almost unlimited power. Madame Coulomb was not only H.P.B.'s secretary, but "you are my friend and that is more." She was authorized to represent H.P.B. as Secretary of the Theosophical Society and as Editor of *The Theosophist*.

Four months after the arrival of the Coulombs, on August 5, 1880, this powder mine blew up. On the Founders' return from a trip to Ceylon, the compound was in an uproar. Miss Bates charged Madame Coulomb with trying to poison her, and vice versa. Wimbridge and all the chelas sided with Miss Bates: if she had to go, Wimbridge would also leave in protest. H.P.B. hesitated, fearing the possible public reaction to her evicting this Englishwoman whom she had brought to India. But she had to choose, and she kept the Coulombs. She was to regret the choice. Theosophists heap abuse on Madame Coulomb, and she was a poor specimen. But the circumstances of her reaching a position in which she could betray H.P.B.'s secrets are part of her story.

In response to urgent pleas from the Sinnetts, H.P.B. decided to abandon her defiant gesture of living in the Indian quarter of Bombay. While in Simla, she commissioned Madame Coulomb to find a new home and have everything moved in her absence. Madame Coulomb picked up a bargain, an isolated bungalow, the Crow's Nest, standing high on the rocky slope of Breach Candy. She leased it for less than half the normal rental because of its reputation as a haunted house. Only once did the ghost walk. As Olcott was dropping off to sleep one night, he felt a corner of his charpoy (bedframe) being lifted. With great presence of mind he lay still and pronounced a certain Arabic "power

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

word" that H.P.B. had taught him in anticipation of such an emergency. Instantly the charpoy settled down on its four legs; the spook never returned.

Gradually H.P.B. was defining the boundaries that must circumscribe every life, for even an occultist must observe a certain routine of eating, sleeping, brushing her teeth. She was established in a more suitable home; she had gotten rid of that stiff-necked Englishwoman and put the more accommodating Coulombs in her place; the magazine was prospering; Simla was a shining memory. Olcott's place in the picture was not quite satisfactory. His chief value was his loyalty in spite of his having deserted his family. But she had no respect for his opinions, and was brutally frank about showing him the contempt that women feel for men they can push around. She could be brutal because she had a sovereign remedy for restoring his good humor after dragging him in the dust. Like an old nurse at a carnival holding a fretful child up to a peep show, H.P.B. made amends by showing Olcott a white-draped figure crossing the compound in the twilight, one of the Masters who had stopped in on his way to Tibet. Or she dropped another letter of patronizing commendation on his head. Even after her death the disillusioned Colonel treasured those moments when he had felt himself transfigured, lifted out of the ruck of mankind for special service, special recognition, by the Supreme Powers of the Universe.

A rumpus between the Founders early in 1881 cleared the air and helped to define their division of labor. Before leaving New York they had tacitly endorsed Hinduism in their formal alliance with the Arya Samaj. It had, however, been something of a shock to observe Hinduism close up instead of through the lofty phrases of Emerson and Sir Edwin Arnold, and to discover at first hand its impersonality and vagueness. H.P.B. had gone sightseeing in the vast temples half a mile square; she had learned to identify a few of the thousands of gods; she had accepted the tropical exuberance

## ENTER THE MAHATMAS

of a god with 16,000 wives who was the father of 180,000 sons, and of princes who wed 10,000 virgins in a single night. She had no difficulty about these legends, for she too had a fantastic imagination, but it was chilling to confront the Hindu's non-proselytizing indifference, his fiat that you cannot become a Hindu, but must be born one.

It was easier to transfer one's affection to Buddhism, substituting Buddha and his precepts for Christ and his teachings. Although Gautama was an Indian prince, his religion had failed to take root in his own land, except for colonies in Ceylon at the southern tip of the continent and in Tibet on the northern border. Dramatizing their identification with India, H.P.B. and Olcott visited Ceylon and, on May 25, 1880, took *pansil*, a Buddhist rite that corresponds to confirmation. This formal rejection of Christianity by two Europeans and their public submission to Buddhist rites flattered the Sinhalese, who overwhelmed them with hospitality. The aged High Priest suavely invited H.P.B. to demonstrate her magical powers. In return she was permitted to witness a devil dance by professional sorcerers.

For two months the Founders toured the island, and this time Olcott played the lead. For some reason, H.P.B. was never able to speak in public; self-consciousness, perhaps something of her childhood sense of inferiority, overwhelmed her and tied her tongue. At public meetings she always had to sit back and let Olcott do the talking. He was prosy, but his sincerity and honest American brotherliness redeemed his performance, and he had the advantage of his white skin. He took his mission seriously, often speaking to large audiences, and he adored it.

The Sinhalese clamored for another tour the next year. H.P.B., who did not enjoy primitive modes of travel or sitting in the background, turned the program over to Olcott. She could spare him from headquarters because he had the business end of the magazine so well organized that his Indian assistants were able to carry on without him for long

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

periods. It was agreed that he would lecture on Buddhism and raise money for an educational fund to establish schools to serve as propaganda centers for Theosophy. The Masters were consulted. They approved, dates were set, and final arrangements accepted.

An opportunity to establish himself in a separate field appealed to Olcott. He knew that queer things went on in the compound, even though H.P.B. always cautioned her assistants to be careful about the Colonel, who shrank from trickery and shut his eyes rather than see it. He grasped at this Ceylon project not only because it led him into the pleasant glow of the lecture platform, but even more because it gave him a dignified excuse to escape for perhaps half of each year from an atmosphere that was increasingly suspect and uncongenial.

On the eve of Olcott's departure for the 1881 tour, H.P.B. suddenly demanded that he cancel the trip and remain in Bombay to help her edit *The Theosophist*. Olcott refused. It was one of the rare occasions when he faced her down. After harrowing scenes, H.P.B. shut herself in her room for an entire week; only Babula could see her, and he emerged looking frightened, bearing her orders in curt notes. One of these chits notified Olcott that all was over; the Masters sent word that they would never communicate with him again in any way if he persisted in this Ceylon trip. Olcott stood his ground. He cared so much for this six-month respite that he was even willing to risk his hopes of that future for which he had deserted his sons and his country. The impasse ended as suddenly as it began. Damodar had just presented H.P.B. with a carriage and handsome pair of horses. On the seventh day of her seclusion she emerged and proposed that they try out the new equipage, an olive branch that Olcott gladly accepted. On the following day, February 19, 1881, the Master Ilarion, en route to Tibet visited H.P.B. It often happened that after her big scenes, when she had been especially difficult, the Masters would

## ENTER THE MAHATMAS

drop by to bring her cheering messages and tokens of their approval.

After an absence of ten months, Olcott returned from Ceylon on December 19, 1881, and found H.P.B. genuinely glad to see him. Some disagreeable problems had piled up in his absence. Madame Coulomb was getting out of hand. She needled Damodar and the other chelas with malicious insinuations about the old days in Cairo when she had known H.P.B. as Madame Metrovitch; she had even carried damaging stories to those archenemies, the missionaries. H.P.B. was strangely powerless before her insolence, avoiding her and waiting for the Colonel's return. By this time she had shifted responsibility for the Coulombs to Olcott's shoulders; she had never wanted Madame Coulomb in the first place.

In her relief at seeing the Colonel, H.P.B. gave him a letter from the Master commending his work in Ceylon. The letter was an idol-smasher. In April, she had tried to intimidate Olcott with warnings of eternal damnation if he persisted in making the Ceylon tour. By December both H.P.B. and the Masters had forgotten these fulminations; not so Olcott. If they were really Masters, he brooded, how could they forget? It was a turning point in Olcott's life. "Thenceforward, I did not love or prize her less as a friend and teacher, but the idea of her infallibility, if I had ever entertained it even approximately, was gone for ever."<sup>1</sup> He had gone too far to retrace his steps. For the rest of his life he could only temporize and keep his eyes shut.

## 2. THE MAHATMAS

( 1880-1 )

The palace of the Maharajah of Benares provided a magnificent setting for a meeting of the General Council of the Theosophical Society in December 1880. Basking in the

<sup>1</sup> Olcott: *O.D.L.*, II, 326.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

feudal pomp of the Maharajah's court, the Theosophists revised their constitution, pledged themselves "to regard all men as equally their brothers, irrespective of caste, colour, race or creed." This challenge to racism and white arrogance adopted after two years in India indicated how rapidly Madame had developed during this period. She had waited until she was nearly fifty to come of age. Overnight she had discarded the crude coquetry typified by her New York *Graphic* interview. In the name of her new Tibetan Mahatmas she grappled with profound philosophical problems for the rest of her life in dramatic contrast with the cheap slickness and self-centered machinations of her earlier hierarchy, Serapis and Tuitit Bey. Regardless of the value of her achievement she qualified for membership in the intellectual elite, that minority of the human race who have minds and are not too lazy to put them to work.

H.P.B. made vigorous use of her new credo, incorporating it in the name of her organization, The Theosophical Society or Universal Brotherhood, giving it precedence in the Theosophist's list of three objectives that today reads unchanged: 1. to form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color; 2. the study of ancient and modern religions, philosophies, and sciences, and the demonstration of the importance of such study; 3. the investigation of the unexplained laws of Nature and the psychical powers latent in man.

The principle of racial equality was oddly at variance with the authoritarian mood and techniques of occultism, the vows of blind obedience and secrecy. The coincidence that the swastika was a favorite symbol and that Theosophists used the word *Aryan* in the names of their magazines and lodges seems more appropriate. Universal Brotherhood was really a bit of opportunism. H.P.B. was doing her utmost to attract important English officials to her cult; she was prepared to do anything to hold them except throw out

## ENTER THE MAHATMAS

her Indian chelas. Exuding the atmosphere of the "mysterious East," they were essential as window dressing. She could also count on them to furnish docile confederates. But to keep the Indian brothers happy she must have a club to force her arrogant British officials to be civil to them. The high valuation she attached to this new objective is evidenced by her securing for it the endorsement of Theosophy's supreme power, the Maha Chohan himself. In the only letter ascribed to him, a letter to Sinnett, he gave the principle his august approval:

*The Theosophical Society was chosen as the corner-stone, the foundation of the future religions of humanity. To achieve the proposed object . . . a more benevolent intermingling of the high and the low, of the Alpha and Omega of Society, was determined upon. The white race must be the first to stretch out the hand of fellowship to the dark nations, to call the poor despised "nigger" brother. This prospect may not smile to all, but he is no Theosophist who objects to this principle.*

In handling the two groups H.P.B. played one off against the other with ingenuity. Stacking the cards in favor of the Hindus on certain showy points, she quietly gave the Sahibs privileges that fully compensated. She never permitted Hume or Sinnett to qualify as chelas: they had wives, ate meat, smoked, drank, were ineligible. But as lay chelas they had important perquisites. The chelas were a picked group of Hindus, vastly impressed and pathetically grateful to Madame for this unique opportunity to take precedence over the white Sahibs. They were, most of them, anemic lads, schooled in a tradition of fatalism and renunciation, taking pride in blind obedience, bringing something excessive and morbid to their adoration of their guru, Madame Blavatsky. Deliberately she promoted Damodar and Mohini, her pet chelas, to dizzy heights: Damodar was part of the astral postoffice, authorized in her absence to forward letters between the Masters and the two moonstruck Englishmen.



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

It was a bold step to undertake to tame the arrogant white sahibs of the 1880's by forcing them to fraternize with Indian subordinates. The imagination and bitter humor displayed show H.P.B. at her most adroit as she maneuvered the two groups, English and Indian, against each other. Cleverly she established her authority and maintained amazing discipline. She relied on the principle of exalting the humble and meek, but did not hesitate to give the humble and meek a kick when it was needed.

For a Western woman, who could lead her own men around by the nose, dominating her Indian confederates was like taking candy from children. She had so many and, in a way, such cruel advantages: economic pressure, offering petty jobs to a starving white-collar class in a poverty-stricken land; white prestige, Western women of education and culture not being accustomed to receiving Indians socially or taking an informed interest in their civilization; understanding of men's hearts, for though a poor judge of human nature, she had an instinctive knowledge of her own kind of men, their insecurity, fears, and heartaches, their weakness for flattery and boyish craving for mystery.

H.P.B. now concentrated on expanding her latest Theosophical novelty, the astral postal system. The physical setup was superlatively simple. Sinnett's and Hume's letters *to* the Masters must be given to her or to Damodar, by hand or through the mails. Letters *from* the Masters were forwarded by H.P.B. and Damodar to the Englishmen. The messages ranged from brief comments penciled on margins in red or blue pencil (just like John King and Serapis) to manuscripts of several thousand words. The typical letter was written on a special paper, made by hand in Kashmir and Tibet. It was usually in red or black ink, sometimes in green, or in colored pencil. Each Master had his distinctive handwriting. It might be delivered in a dozen ways. Letters brought in by Babula from the postman would contain en-

## ENTER THE MAHATMAS

closures or postscripts from the Masters, though there was no evidence of anyone's having tampered with the seal. Mystic notes materialized suddenly under a visitor's pillow, on his bureau, in his luggage. They fluttered down in railway carriages, at picnics, from between the cloths that swathe Indian ceilings to prevent lizards and insects from dropping down the back of your neck.

By easy stages H.P.B. had arranged the metamorphosis of her familiar spirits into Mahatmas. John King's obsolescence began in New York, that of Tuitit Bey and his Brotherhood of Luxor soon after she reached India. It was a gradual disappearance recalling Alice in Wonderland's Cheshire Cat, which faded gently away until only the grin was left. H.P.B. stopped talking about Egyptian Brothers and substituted a Tibetan hierarchy with Indian-sounding names that have been criticized by scholars as philologically incongruous. Ultimately Theosophists picked up the term Mahatma (literally great soul), roughly equivalent to our Saint. The four leading characters of the new hierarchy were:

KOOT HOOMI LAL SINGH, who signed a majority of the Mahatma letters and was usually known by the initials K. H. He had begun this last incarnation as a Punjabi, a member of an old Kashmiri family. Interested in occultism from boyhood, he had traveled widely and studied at Leipzig University during the 1870's. H.P.B.'s most direct reminiscence of K. H. was camouflaged in the distortions of a dream: she had visited his home in Tibet in 1870, met his sister and her child, and sat on a mat in a corner of the room while K. H., dressed in riding togs, strode back and forth discussing *Senzar*, a mystery-language that she had been studying with him.

THE MASTER MORYA, known as Master M., was an Elder Statesman held in reserve to lend authority in case of need.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

He snapped out laconic statements in contrast to the rambling style of Koot Hoomi and of H.P.B. Morya's letters rarely exceeded a half page or a single page. When phenomena had been bungled and suspicion reared its ugly head, M. appeared with authoritative comments and terse orders. H.P.B. claimed that he had known her ever since childhood and had saved her life in early escapades; he was the Master of her dreams, the hero of that *nuît memorable* in London, back in 1851—or was it 1853? On one occasion the stern old Mahatma relaxed sufficiently to sigh over an early photograph of H.P.B. and remark more tenderly than grammatically, "That's her as I knew her first, the lovely maiden." <sup>2</sup>

MASTER ILARION, also written Hilarion, a Greek whom H.P.B. had known since 1860, was supposed to assist with her writings. After reaching India, she signed his name to two fantastic stories that she reprinted in *The Theosophist*. When she originally sold these stories to the New York *Sun* in December 1875, she was still in her Egyptian phase, and they stand in the *Sun* files over the signature Hadji Morya.

DJUAL KHUL or D. K. was a celestial factotum, carrying messages, drawing diagrams, uttering epigrams in support of H.P.B.

THE MAHA CHOHAN towered above these lesser figures, a Being of large, vague powers, corresponding fairly well to the usual religious concept of God. He was used only on special occasions as when he endorsed the adoption of the Universal Brotherhood plank.

Originally the letters from the Mahatmas were sunk in fathoms of mystery, guarded as elaborately as diplomatic dispatch boxes. Sinnett and Hume, eager to share them with each other, were not even allowed to let their most confidential clerks make copies of them. They were required

<sup>2</sup> *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, p. 254. (Hereafter referred to in the notes as *Mahatma Letters*.)

## ENTER THE MAHATMAS

to take time to copy these long, rambling discourses by their own hands, making two extra copies, one for H.P.B. (because of course she did not know what was in them) and one for her favorite chela, Damodar.

When the letters finally came to light they scarcely justified so much mystery. In addition to metaphysical abstractions and occult technicalities, K. H. wrote Sinnett pages of petty gossip. When things were going badly he could be very spiteful and abusive, resembling his agent, H.P.B. This barbed chatter in its lumbering fashion had a definite purpose; every incident fitted into a pattern of rousing sympathy for H.P.B., smoothing over discrepancies, and reinforcing her authority. Always on the lookout for competent confederates, Madame repeatedly became involved with rogues and madmen, eulogizing them one month, blasting them the next. Debonairly the Masters echoed her revised estimates. In spite of their alleged power to read minds, they seemed unembarrassed by their failure to detect impostors until the sheriff had his hand on their coatsleeves. Scores of earnest men and women have lavished an aggregate of several lifetimes of study on the Mahatma letters. A long list of books and monographs, pro and con, is still growing. The Hare brothers, one a disillusioned Theosophist, devoted years of intensive research to their book, *Who Wrote the Mahatma Letters*, a scholarly and devastating study published in 1936. Their verdict was that the letters, with the exception of a few credited to her confederates, were written by H.P.B.

Sinnett used a month's sea trip to England in February 1881 to write his book *The Occult World*, in which he amplified press accounts of the Simla phenomena and used discreet quotations from the Mahatmas' letters. Passing through Bombay, he received an outline of the proposed book from the Master K. H. At the moment, H.P.B. was isolated by an attack of temperament, and Olcott delivered the outline with a note enclosed:

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

*Dear O: Forward this immediately to A. P. Sinnett and do not breathe a word of it to H.P.B. Let her alone and do not go near her for a few days. The storm will subside.*

K. H. L. S.

Such homely devices as this convinced the neophytes that H.P.B. was not the author of the Mahatma letters. The caution not to breathe a word to H.P.B. proved that she had not written the note. Moreover, the author viewed her tantrums with the impersonal tolerance of a sage, far removed from the passions of humanity. Trusting Olcott and serious-minded Sinnett would have indignantly repudiated a suggestion that H.P.B. in the white heat of her rage could sit down behind a closed door and concoct this impersonal comment on her frenzy: "Let her alone . . . the storm will subside."

On his return to India in July, Sinnett went directly to the Crow's Nest to inquire for a message from the Masters. *The Occult World*, rushed through the press during his four months in England, was creating a sensation. The first competently written account of Theosophic claims, it went through a dozen editions and was the most widely read and effective piece of propaganda published during H.P.B.'s lifetime. Sinnett expected a message of commendation, and H.P.B. was touched by his boyish disappointment when she said there was nothing for him.

Rising early next day according to Indian custom, H.P.B. encountered Sinnett on the veranda in the cool of the morning and led him back into his room, where they seated themselves on either side of a center table. Sinnett could talk of only one subject, "Why on earth have I not had a letter in answer to mine?" he asked.

"Perhaps he will send it to you. Try to exercise your will power; try to appeal to him. Ask him to send it to you."

"No," replied Sinnett, "I will await his time; he will send it sooner or later, no doubt."

At that instant a package dropped down on the table be-

## ENTER THE MAHATMAS

side him, a large envelope containing a manuscript of seven thousand words. It was the first in a series of abstruse expositions of Theosophic theory, and was received by the English journalist with humble reverence. On July 8, 1881, the astral postoffice had entered upon its second phase.

### 3. SECOND SUMMER IN SIMLA

( 1881 )

The withering blight of another hot weather was upon them. H.P.B. and Sinnett were glad to accept an invitation to spend August and September 1881 with Mr. Hume in Simla. Mrs. Sinnett was still in England, Olcott in Ceylon. They were rather pleased to have their group stripped down to the essential three. Rothney Castle, Hume's home, provided a luxurious and romantic setting; the summer sparkled with moments of enchantment. During the morning the men followed a business routine slowed down to the leisurely tempo of the white Sahib in hot-weather India. In the afternoon they returned to the Castle and, leaning back in lazy deck chairs, watched the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas while bare-footed servants in gleaming white served cool drinks and punkahs pulled by unseen coolies languidly stirred the air. From then on it was pure bliss until they reluctantly parted long after midnight. H.P.B. was at her best casually reminiscing about the Masters. Almost every day they were interrupted by the tinkle of a silver bell summoning Upasika—the Masters' pet name for her—to her room. In a few minutes she would return with a timely message from K. H., or even from M., about the matter in hand.

H.P.B. was on her mettle. Hume was the most important person with whom she had come to grips, but he required more careful stalking than the usual prospect. She had a robust sense of humor, often sardonic, often ribald, and she loved to laugh. But Hume's quips made her uncomfortable.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

"My dear Old Lady," he wrote, ". . . though I am desperately inclined at times to believe that you are an impostor, I believe I love you more than any of them." It left a bad taste: she could not be sure how much he meant it when he called her "a chronic humbug" or complained that he had never been given satisfactory assurance that "all the letters were not evolved out of the Old Lady's fertile brain."

This was *lèse-majesté*, but she forced herself to put up with it and found relief in abusing him to Sinnett and Olcott: "I despise Hume . . . the biggest liar in creation . . . a Pecksniff . . . Saint Moses . . . such a skunk as he is . . . the evil genius of the Society . . . mark my word, Hume is beginning to be off his head." In addition to their study of the Ancient Wisdom, Hume and Sinnett were eager to discuss several practical matters in Olcott's absence. They wanted their own branch of the Theosophical Society in Simla, admitting only Sahibs and Memsahibs, so exclusive that it would deal with H.P.B. and the Masters, but be independent of President Olcott and the parent society. This proposal was firmly vetoed.

It was all very well for Hume and Sinnett to look down their noses at Olcott, but it may have been his absence that precipitated the summer's disastrous climax, for he served as a lightning rod to carry off the flashes of his lady's displeasure. In his absence, H.P.B.'s tempers continued to coruscate, but when the flashes struck these proper English gentlemen she discovered that she had made a social error. The two men, having agreed to write a series of eight articles for the magazine, had conspired to pin the Old Lady down and force her to organize her theories into a more orderly sequence. The weeks were passing and she had contrived so far to short-circuit their questions and slide out from under their efforts. In default of reducing the Ultimate Truth to something the average man could understand, they cast about for a new approach and determined to go over Mad-

## ENTER THE MAHATMAS

ame's head. They would write directly to the Master K. H., declare their ambition to serve as his interpreters, explain that it was impossible to make sense of many of H.P.B.'s communications, and urge that they be permitted to establish direct contact with the Masters.

So far, so good. The letter was drafted, revised, copied, sealed. Then came the rub. What to do with it? They could not suspect H.P.B. of peeking at mail not intended for her, and yet. . . . It was a ridiculous situation, and the men knew it. Yet, if they could only clear this hurdle, it would be worth having looked ridiculous for a few minutes. Finally — there was nothing else to do — Sinnett agreed to ask H.P.B. to forward the letter for them. He found her strumming at the piano in the empty ballroom; she poked the letter into her pocket without looking at it and continued playing. He had hardly reseated himself in the library when H.P.B. burst in upon him. She was white with rage. Her eyes glowed with an almost manic intensity.

"What have you been doing?" she screamed.

An embarrassing scene followed, with H.P.B. erupting threats and vituperation. All was over, they had killed all chances of further occult advancement, the Masters would never communicate with them again, she would abandon India and, with Olcott, move Theosophy to Ceylon, where they were better appreciated. The men tried to stop her by asking sternly if she had opened and read a sealed letter not intended for her, but she paid no attention and continued to castigate them like naughty schoolboys.

Hysterics of H.P.B.'s type find a perverse satisfaction in the cruelty of such scenes; they come back from them refreshed and amiable, ready to forgive and forget. But Hume could not forget. Such a scene he considered worse than vulgar. It was immoral, dissolute, and it convinced him that H.P.B. was an impostor: no woman guilty of such intemperance could have been selected to represent supernatural powers. He continued to act as host with icy cour-



## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

tesy, but withdrew from further discussions. In vain H.P.B. tried to put back the pieces of the dream she had shattered. Master Morya sharply reprimanded Hume: for days he had barely looked at H.P.B., and as he knew how excitable and ill-balanced she was, such a hostile attitude was wicked and cruel. Struggling for a reconciliation, H.P.B. hung on grimly, continuing to accept the hospitality of a man who barely spoke to her.

The Master K. H. intervened with an ingenious defense of the Old Lady. The occult chiefs, he wrote Sinnett, had been searching for nearly a century for someone competent to serve as their interpreter to the western world. With all her faults, H.P.B. was the best qualified person in existence, and they would have to take the Masters' word for it. K. H. admitted that she was "a very undesirable transmitter of our messages," and he enumerated her disabilities: her unbalanced mind, her nervous excitement, her outbursts of temper, all those habits "which so revolt you." He could not explain more fully, the time was not ripe, they would not be capable of understanding even if they were told. But it came down to this: the Old Lady's condition was intimately connected with her occult training in Tibet. According to Theosophical theory borrowed from Paracelsus, the complete human being consists of seven principles or elements. Chelas returning to this world after serving an apprenticeship in Tibet are required to leave behind a piece of themselves, one of these elements, as a hostage, a guarantee never to reveal top secrets. Lacking her seventh principle, H.P.B. was handicapped, was a "psychological cripple"; she could not be expected to maintain the poise and self-control of the normal person. Aspirants to occult knowledge must learn to accept H.P.B.'s whims and rages. Anyone who could not pass this elementary test was not eligible as an occultist.

Taking up the immediate situation, K. H. admitted that the Master Morya had made a mistake; he should not have

## ENTER THE MAHATMAS

sent H.P.B. in her disturbed state with a message to Mr. Sinnett. "But to hold her responsible for her purely psychological excitement, and to let her see your contemptuous smiles was *positively sinful*. Pardon me my Brothers and good Sirs my plain talk." K. H. roundly condemned their attitude and told them that "however much polished outwardly, they had been very cruel."<sup>8</sup> When Mr. Hume still remained glacial, the Master M., throwing off his reserve, wrote an eleven-page letter of pleading and reprimand. Of course H.P.B. had not read their letter; he, the Master Morya, took full responsibility for her conduct, and she was acting under his orders in every detail. He had been in the room all the time and had heard every word that was spoken. He reproached them for failure to appreciate the nervous strain under which she labored in handling their constant letters. They must see that she was all of a tremble and ready to go to pieces. In fact, he was considering putting a stop to all communication because the burden fell too heavily upon their loyal, devoted servant, H.P.B., who stood always ready to give her heart's blood for the Holy Cause.

The best that H.P.B. could manage was to postpone Hume's resignation for another year. He was committed to serve as president of the Simla branch, and he probably preferred not to give public notice of the breach of relations. He even finished a pamphlet, *Essay on Miracles*, answering attacks on the Theosophists for inconsistency and breach of their own codes. After that, he wrote H.P.B. another of his ironic notes:

*You, you dear old sinner (and wouldn't you have been a reprobate under normal conditions?) are the worst breach of all — your entire want of control of temper — your utterly un-Buddha and un-Christlike manner of speaking of all who offend you — your reckless statements form together an indictment that it is hard to meet.*

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

He said that he had put the best possible face on all "the awkward facts," but he had to admit that he himself remained unconvinced:

*Never, until I came to defend it did I realize the extreme weakness of our position . . . though I may stop others' mouths, I personally am not satisfied.*<sup>4</sup>

Until Hume resigned and severed all relations, H.P.B. refused to give up hope. She made the most competent efforts of her career on his behalf. She also stooped to childish tricks on the principle that to make people believe, you must show them signs and wonders. She decided that a Simla confederate to touch off phenomena in her absence would make an impression. She was paying a stiff price for such a confederate at Adyar, Madame Coulomb. Candidates were scarce, and she had to take almost anyone, regardless of qualifications. Fern, a clerk in Hume's office, had been permitted to meet Madame because he had shown some small aptitude as a medium. Immediately he was picked out for unprecedented honors. The reticent Master Morya sent Fern his picture and actually signed his letters, "Yours still lovingly, M."

Hume cautioned H.P.B. that Fern was a humbug and a liar, and even wrote a letter to Koot Hoomi about him. Fern fumbled the small parts assigned him in minor phenomena and stupidly let himself be caught in falsehoods. H.P.B. dismissed warnings as caused by jealousy, and K. H. continued to rhapsodize about the growth of Fern's soul: "A soul is being breathed into him, a new spirit let in, and with every day he is advancing toward a state of higher development." Suddenly the Masters changed their tune. Fern was "a double dealing monkey" and "a tavern Pericles with a sweet smile for every street Aspasia." Master Morya, who had been downright silly about the young man, re-

<sup>4</sup> *Letters H.P.B.*, p. 306.

### *ENTER THE MAHATMAS*

pudiated his numerous letters to him; they were forgeries, emanating from the *dugpas* who had charge of Fern. But it was too late. Fern was caught red-handed embezzling Hume's payrolls. That ended his Simla career and added no lustre to the reputation of the Masters.

## CHAPTER XI



### *WHAT IS TRUTH?*

(1882)

THEOSOPHISTS believe that the Mahatmas wrote the Mahatma letters. If Madame assisted, it was only as an amanuensis who, to help economize on their use of magical power, took down messages they dictated.

Non-Theosophists and ex-Theosophists who have investigated the evidence are convinced that the Mahatmas were creatures of Madame's imagination and that she—or, in a few cases, her confederates—composed and wrote the letters. It is really a flattering impeachment to charge Madame with ability to pit her wits against such able men as Hume and Sinnett and hold them for two years hoodwinked and fascinated by the cosmology taking shape under their joint efforts. It required imagination, mental agility, and hard work to keep ahead of them. Like *Oliver Twist*, they were forever clamoring for more. They had heard enough generalities about the Inscrutable East and the formulas locked in its bosom; they demanded to be taken behind the scenes and see what made occultism tick. This was exactly what H.P.B. herself had come to India to find out, and so far, she had had poor luck.

The only promising source of information at the moment

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

was a man she had not met. As Editor of *The Theosophist*, she had heard from a Telegu Brahmin, Subba Row, whose letters revealed, besides an interest in Theosophy, a keen mind and scholarship in the Hindu classics. T. Subba Row, a pleader in the Madras courts, was a Sanskrit scholar, a deputy of the college of Vedantin learning in Mysore, and a disciple of Shankaracharya, the great sage of southern India. H.P.B. sought help from this stranger, whom she had never even seen. She wrote begging him to direct her to a guru competent to instruct some distinguished and influential Englishmen in the secrets of occultism. Such a request from an unknown Western woman was enough to make Hindu scholars back off; they have seen too much exploitation of Western credulity by the charlatans of magic. Subba Row replied with evasive generalities, whereupon H.P.B., who really had to produce something to quiet her neophytes, arranged a tour with Olcott in April 1882 to include Madras, the home of Subba Row. On meeting her in person, the learned Hindu inevitably succumbed, accepted her unseemly haste as a western eccentricity, and did his best to be helpful. He told her that a few real Adepts still survived in India and that he believed the truth of the Ancient Wisdom would ultimately be revealed. The essentials for restoring the *lost formula* were to be found in India, if one had the insight to recognize them:

We *still have* the clue in our hands to understand the teaching of our old Rushis and the doctrines of every other system of Philosophy which has sprung from the Ancient Wisdom Religion. And I venture to affirm . . . we *still have* the clue to find out the *LOST FORMULA* if it is indeed already lost. This is not a vain boast I assure you. . . . It should be strongly impressed on the minds of the English theosophists that these men are not very anxious to get their existence recognized by them.<sup>1</sup>

It was vague, but it was something. It was, in fact, the most encouraging response H.P.B. had found, and she took

<sup>1</sup> *Letters H.P.B.*, p. 317.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

comfort in it. At this first meeting with Subba Row she commissioned him, behind the Colonel's back, to purchase Huddlestons Gardens, a handsome estate lying six miles outside the city. She *must* have him available for easy reference. Picking up the Colonel, the Coulombs, and the Chelas, she moved her international headquarters to Adyar in order to be near Subba Row. They have remained there ever since.

Even Subba Row could not solve her immediate problem, however. Hume and Sinnett were calling her bluff. They insisted on elementary lessons in producing supernormal manifestations. She could not explain that most of her phenomena depended on simple legerdemain or the aid of confederates. In this emergency H.P.B. backhandedly revealed what she really believed, thus affording a glimpse into the workings of an occultist's mind. Although faking her own effects, she still earnestly believed that a few genuine adepts existed and handed down closely guarded formulas of the Ancient Wisdom, a body of arcane knowledge that enabled them to perform by will power alone the marvels which she could only pretend to achieve. She was complacently confident of her ability to ferret out these secrets if she could only track down a genuine adept. Goaded on by her determination to hold Hume, she applied herself with fresh vigor to her quest for the Secrets of the East, never abandoned, but merely retarded by the rebuffs of the Swami Dayanand.

Because a belief in magic and the supernatural satisfies an universal human craving, it is used by every religion. Through the centuries an elaborate fantasia has been composed upon the theme of Indian yogis and their powers, real and imagined. The rope trick is an example of the myths cherished by generations of the credulous. The mysterious East has enjoyed a long term advertising campaign as unreal as a Florida real estate boom. Its bibliography ranges from the memoirs of ascetics, true and false, to the lurid pages of

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

the Sunday supplements, and it leaves the innocent bystander wondering what he may believe. This uncertainty gives unusual interest to the confidences of Subba Row, Hindu scholar and lawyer, speaking from his heart to a woman clever enough to convince him that she was not only his superior in knowledge of the Mysteries, but that she was an occultist of high rank. Her correspondence with Subba Row was the realest thing H.P.B. ever found in her years of search for the secrets of occultism.

As a southerner, Subba Row naturally believed that what little knowledge of occultism survived was to be found in the south of India, and especially in his own Madras presidency. He admitted with disarming candor that he had never heard of any beings comparable to the Tibetan adepts under whom H.P.B. claimed to have trained: the few initiates remaining in southern India were hermits who lived alone in remote and secret spots. They attained their powers through years of rigorous asceticism and complete detachment from the world. Absorbed in their mystical quest to exchange the reality of this world for visions of a future and better world, wrote Subba Row, they took no interest in politics and economics; it was indifferent to them whether India was governed well or ill, whether famines ravaged the land, whether the truths of Yoga Vidya became more or less widely known.

Even if her Britishers should accidentally stumble over a real yogi Subba Row questioned whether they would profit by the encounter. Indian ascetics despised such essentials of an Englishman's code as personal cleanliness and certain minimum decencies. Their appearance was revolting, their naked bodies smeared with ashes and filth, their hair matted, their eyes red-rimmed from drugs, their limbs often covered with sores and vermin. They would simulate madness and babble nonsense in order to get rid of importunate questioners. If an adept was finally convinced of a would-be chela's serious interest, the neophyte was required



## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

to give up family, wealth, and position, and to clothe himself in rags and follow his guru into the depths of the forest before he was considered for probation. "Is there a single English theosophist who is prepared to do so?" asked Subba Row. He warned H.P.B. that she was attempting the impossible. These adepts had no earthly desires through which they could be induced to disclose their secrets. They realized that if the public ever tracked them down, their purpose in life would be defeated, their retreats desecrated, and they would find themselves surrounded by gaping sight-seers. Subba Row assured H.P.B. that in his opinion none of the southern adepts could be persuaded to take the interest that, by her own statement, the Masters Koot Hoomi and Morya had already shown on behalf of the Theosophists. It was difficult to toss back his recommendation that she appeal to her own Mahatmas on behalf of her two aspirants!

Six months later, in August 1882, having made no progress in the hunting of the elusive guru, H.P.B. undertook to secure the services of Subba Row himself as occult coach for her neophytes. Expense was no object: he might go to them in Simla, or they would go to him in Madras, traveling the length of India, fifteen hundred miles, as frequently as need be. Subba Row shied away in horror. He knew that the Britishers would bring along their prejudices, arrogance, and scientific preconceptions, and that they would soon be insisting that he conform to their standards and answer their questions. Occultism could not be taught on those terms: like a vacuum, it could not be diagrammed. He must impose the conditions, even the mood, and he must reserve the freedom to refuse to answer tabooed questions. Neophytes would inevitably be disappointed. He reminded H.P.B. that he was interested in philosophy and metaphysics and knew little about the phenomenal side.

Refusing to take no for an answer, H.P.B. tried to reach him through his patriotism. These were influential men,

H.P.B. to H.P. Blavatsky  
with no kind regards.

H.P.B.'s mocking inscription in her copy of "The Voice of Silence"

Will the Chelas have the required  
patience?  
All

Message and signature of Mahatma Morya



## WHAT IS TRUTH?

prepared to carry out any orders of the Mahatmas, and she tried to bribe him with an offer of their influence with the Raj on behalf of his country. He was, she told him, India's "only plank of salvation." Subba Row was not to be bought. Finally H.P.B. brought out her last reserves, and Subba Row reluctantly consented to take her pupils on the written orders of the Masters M. and K. H. "I cannot but obey their commands." He protected himself by refusing to meet his pupils in person, limiting the lessons to correspondence. He had one other resource, Oriental delaying tactics. Hume had resigned from the Society, and Sinnett had left India permanently while Subba Row was still circling around with preliminaries.

The ultimate effort to hold Hume's interest and the most costly for H.P.B. had to be off the record. The Mahatmas wrote Sinnett more than one hundred letters, discussing anything and everything, casually mixing in gossip and scandal. By contrast, in their dozen letters to Hume, they put their best metaphysical foot forward. A half dozen of these epistles written in July and August 1882 are still reprinted as Theosophical classics. They discuss the nature of God, of evil, cosmic origins, conditions after death, and Theosophical theories, such as the planetary chain (borrowed from the Hindus). Unconsciously Hume was serving as H.P.B.'s collaborator, checking her arguments, pointing out omissions and inconsistencies, submitting lists of carefully thought-out questions, extending her canvas to cosmic proportions. Although she had a score of irons in the fire, H.P.B. devoted long days and nights of study and concentration to producing these letters. In spite of all her abuse and name-calling, she appreciated the quality of the man and gave her utmost in an effort to hold him.

The final clash came over a fundamental issue, one that has caused unlimited grief to honest Theosophists. It is an issue inherent in cults that depend on special revelations and expect their deified founders to grow into seven league

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

boots. It is especially menacing in occultism because the vows of secrecy invite abuses and condone behavior that would not be tolerated in the full light of day. Both H.P.B. and Annie Besant, her successor, were intoxicated by a cumulative sense of power that fed upon the abject surrender and hero worship of their disciples. Most cults find it a heady brew, and it leads to strange vagaries. Under the influence of a craving for ever greater power, H.P.B. required oaths of cast-iron obedience and secrecy. Behind this demand for blind obedience Madame camouflaged her defiance of a question that has baffled philosophers and moralists from the beginning of time: What is Truth?

Jesting Pilate would not stay for an answer. Neither would Hume. He had a horrid feeling that whatever it was, Truth was being roughly handled by the Mahatmas. He had been unable to ignore the implications of the Fern episode. If chela candidates were carefully selected before being admitted to probation, how, asked Hume, could the Masters pass this crook in the first place? In reply the Masters tried to establish fundamental distinctions between Eastern and Western standards of honor. Everything unpalatable to Hume from codes of conduct to definitions of terms was made to swing on this difference. They had a long controversy over the word "ingenuity," which K. H. had used too casually, saying that he exercised his ingenuity to reconcile an inconsistent passage in *Isis*. A chorus of protests rose from Hume, Massey, and Sinnett, who considered it "a most unhappy phrase." To them it seemed sacrilegious to suggest that the Mahatmas were capable of craft and guile. They clung passionately to their own concept of the Masters as pure spirits dealing in eternal truth and as intolerant of duplicity as an English gentleman.

Insidiously, persistently, the Masters strove to undermine the inbred reactions of these Britishers to right and wrong. Cleverly H.P.B. traded on the trend from the black-and-white moral codes of the past to the misty greys of the mod-

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

ern world. Master K. H. attacked the problem with a flourish: he quoted Kant's definition of conscience and ridiculed the theory that in the absence of traditions and codes man would find a dependable guide in his own moral perceptions—in other words, in his conscience. Master M. attacked ignorant complacency, and wrote about maya (illusion). Man grasped so little of the real truth beneath illusions that he was not competent to reach valid conclusions on any subject. Whereas, boasted Master Morya, "we ignorant Asiatics of Tibet" were so accustomed to reading the minds of our correspondents as to give little heed to their actual words. In view of the Mahatmas' disastrous failure to distinguish between rogues and honest men, their complacency seemed ill-advised to Mr. Hume.

Feeling her way to discover how far she could go, H.P.B. gave her neophytes individualized treatment. She was cautious with Hume, but she had progressive hurdles for men like Sinnett who failed to cry stop. When they passed these tests, they received heart-warming letters of commendation from the Masters, as in the case of H.P.B.'s topaz ring. Mrs. Sinnett had admired it, and right in her presence H.P.B. miraculously duplicated it and slipped the twin ring on her finger. Master K. H. wrote to Sinnett in October 1882, congratulating him on having said nothing about his suspicions of the episode: "Disliking in the depths of your soul such a useless deception . . . you have not repudiated her [H.P.B.] for all that, nor exposed nor complained of her in the papers." K. H. assured Sinnett that his suspicions were unjustified. The ring had been miraculously doubled, but that was beside the point. The important thing was that even though doubting the good faith of the phenomenon, Sinnett had kept his mouth shut. "You were undeniably right in acting with such discretion in the matter."<sup>2</sup>

Reactions to this course of training corresponded to the temperament of the disciple. Olcott could shut his eyes to

<sup>2</sup> *Mahatma Letters*, p. 310.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

anything. Sinnett also shut his eyes, but could be pushed only so far. Hume liked the shivery feeling of playing Let's Pretend with mysteries, but he drew the line at tampering with his British standard of honor. He defined his position at the outset in a careful letter to the Master K. H. In it, he respectfully questioned the Master's ethics in commending Olcott on the sole ground that he never asked questions, but always obeyed. The correspondence is especially interesting because sixty years later this question of blind obedience became a major issue in a world war, with the Axis dictatorships attempting to enforce it, and the Allied nations successfully opposing it. Hume objected strongly to:

*this renunciation of private judgment, this abnegation of one's own personal responsibility, this accepting the dictates of outside voices as a substitute for one's own conscience. . . . [Such an attitude was] a sin of no ordinary magnitude. . . . Nay further, I feel bound to say that if this doctrine of blind obedience is an essential one in your system . . . then frankly the matter for me is at an end—I am no military machine.*<sup>3</sup>

Vainly Sinnett struggled to reconcile his guru and his prize protégé. Blind obedience was essential to H.P.B.'s program; there could be no compromise. In September 1882, two years of sparring with Hume ended; he resigned from the presidency of the select Simla branch and withdrew from the Society. H.P.B. was both winner and loser. (See Appendix G, page 324.)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 437.

## CHAPTER XII



### *HOODOO YEARS*

(1882—3)

THE OUTPUT of Mahatma letters reached its high point in 1882 with more than one hundred thousand words to Sinnett alone. H.P.B. was writing the history of the universe, beginning a million years ago. Just when she needed peace and quiet for this ambitious task, she was caught up in a succession of catastrophes. The series began with another of her efforts to secure a medium as a confederate.

William Eglinton, a popular young English medium visiting India, had become the rage. In Calcutta he was the guest of Colonel and Mrs. Gordon. Prominent members of the Simla group of Theosophists, the Gordons were chagrined when Eglinton's spirit controls, Ernest and Joey, said that they had never heard of the Masters K. H. and M. Worse still, when Eglinton came out of his trance, he corroborated his spirits and said there were no such people as Mahatmas. Suddenly after some swift undercover work, all three—Eglinton, Ernest, and Joey—announced that there had been a misunderstanding, that they knew the Mahatmas well and had been appointed to work in concert with them. Before Eglinton set sail from Calcutta it had been quietly arranged that the Master K. H. should visit him on



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

board his ship on March 24, when it was several days at sea, and should bring back letters from Eglinton to H.P.B. in Bombay and to Mrs. Gordon in Calcutta.

Seven devoted Hindu chelas and probationers were with H.P.B. as witnesses the evening when the Eglinton letters dropped from the ceiling. A few minutes later—transmission by the Masters is practically instantaneous—the Eglinton letters forwarded to Calcutta dropped from Mrs. Gordon's ceiling. It happened that Colonel Olcott and Madame's chela-on-probation, Bhawani Row, were staying with the Gordons at the moment.

Then things began to go wrong. For purposes of identification, Eglinton, on board the *Vega*, asked one of the passengers, a prominent Englishwoman from Calcutta, to mark the several letters he was entrusting to Koot Hoomi, and she made three crosses on each letter. Later, on her return to Calcutta, she noticed that Mrs. Gordon's letter was marked with Latin crosses, not the crosses she had made and not in the same position on the envelope. Evidently this was not the original letter. Another development confirmed this conclusion. When Eglinton mentioned to another shipmate, J. E. O'Connor, that Master Koot Hoomi was aboard and would leave shortly carrying letters back to India, O'Connor suggested that he too would like to send a word of greeting to Madame. Eglinton was not quick-witted enough to handle the situation and he stupidly accepted the man's note.

Miraculous arrival of the Eglinton letters on March 24 was widely publicized, but the O'Connor enclosure was never heard of until May, eight weeks after the event, time enough for the *Vega* to have reached port and an east-bound mail to have returned to Madame. Sinnett heard about it by the same mail, receiving a letter from O'Connor in London, who wanted to know what had happened. Sinnett, who had been proudly impressed by the Eglinton letters, now telegraphed H.P.B. in distress, passing on

## HOODOO YEARS

O'Connor's query. She gave herself twenty-four hours before answering and handled a messy situation as well as was humanly possible. O'Connor's letter was so stupid and transparent, she wrote, that it had not seemed worth mentioning. Of course she had received it, about an hour after the other letters, *but* the Masters had ordered her to say nothing about it! She added elaborate sub-alibis, a letter Damodar had forgotten to mail, etc. She closed her letter with one of those Scriptural identifications reserved for emergencies:

*Methinks I hear the cock crowing . . . I hope I will not hear him crow thrice. O Peter, for your own sake, not my sake. Yours forever in all the bitterness of my heart,*

H. P. BLAVATSKY.<sup>1</sup>

Six weeks later she changed the entire story and repudiated Eglinton as a poor epileptic, subject to fits and suspected of trickery.

While Madame was still revising the Eglinton story she suffered a peculiarly damaging rebuff. In April 1882, Swami Dayanand publicly repudiated the Theosophists. On his guard because of her exaggerated interest in phenomena, he had learned of several abortive efforts on her part to secure confederates among his followers. Originally attracted by the non-sectarian professions of these Western Theosophists, he had been surprised and alienated by the widely advertised conversion of the Founders to Buddhism. An honest, simple reformer, he now thundered forth like a Savonarola with overtones of H.P.B. herself. She was, he said, an ignorant adventuress and a liar; her court of salaaming Indian chelas were nothing more than confederates. He had taken the trouble to question her and the Colonel and had found that neither of them knew anything about the Yoga Vidya (occult science) practiced by the swamis of old. For her to say that she performed phenomena without apparatus or confederates and that she depended solely on the

<sup>1</sup> *Letters H.P.B.*, p. 17.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

forces of nature and her own will power "is to tell a lie."<sup>2</sup> The Swami denounced Madame and her cult from the platform, and at the close of his lectures Samajists distributed handbills describing H.P.B.'s fraudulent activities. Having innocently associated himself with the Theosophists, the Swami in honest indignation made a thorough job of publicizing his disillusionment.

The attack was a double disaster for H.P.B. She dared not threaten to sue the Swami for libel, and how could she explain her mistake in calling him a Mahatma? Worse than that: how could her Mahatmas have been deceived about him?

The next calamity resulted from still another effort to use a medium-confederate. The story broke in July 1882 when Massey, first President of the British Theosophists, and recipient of the magical cardcase from Hurrychund, published letters critical of H.P.B. in the London spiritualist weekly, *Light*. He asked how it happened that although reincarnation was now a basic Theosophical theory, Madame had dismissed the subject almost contemptuously when writing *Isis* a few years earlier. He quoted among other passages the statement, from page 351 of the first volume of *Isis*, that reincarnation was not a rule in nature but "an exception like the teratological phenomenon of a two-headed infant."

The sequence of events leading to Massey's disillusionment had begun when H.P.B. had publicly denounced Hurrychund Chintamon for pocketing her six hundred rupees. To get away from it all, Hurrychund had gone to London, where he was surprised to find himself known and talked about in spiritualist circles as the donor of the mysterious cardcase—with his signature enclosed—that Madame had materialized for Mr. Massey. He took pleasure in informing Massey and everyone else that the whole thing was *tamasha*, a fraud. Neither he nor the Swami Dayanand

<sup>2</sup> *Journal*, Society for Psychical Research, November 1885.

## HOODOO YEARS

had supernatural powers, and Madame's Mahatmas and her phenomena were all bogus.

Anticipating such exposures, H.P.B. constantly warned her followers of the unpopularity of their cause and told them to be ready for libelous attacks and persecution, which were permitted in order to test their faith and their fitness for further advancement along the thorny path of occultism. This was not, however, enough to satisfy Massey in the face of the evidence furnished by Hurrzychund. His belief in H.P.B. and her whole system was challenged. On her way out to India, H.P.B. had forehandedly tried to provide against such a predicament by securing a medium-confederate. She had exacted a promise from Mrs. Billing that in case of need her spirit control, Ski, would deliver messages from H.P.B. to Massey according to directions. She now wrote Mrs. Billing reminding her of her promise:

*My dear Good Friend: Do you remember what Z [Ski] told or rather promised to me? That whenever there is need for it he will always be ready to carry any message, leave it either on Massey's table, his pocket, or some other mysterious place. Well now, there is the most important need for such a show of all his powers. Please ask him to take the enclosed letter and put it into M[assey]'s pocket, or in some other still more mysterious place. But he must not know it is Z [Ski]. . . .<sup>3</sup>*

The enclosure was a warm commendation of Massey from Koot Hoomi.

When Massey opened the minute book at the next meeting of the Theosophists, a letter addressed in the well-known hand of the Master K. H. stared up at him. Everyone disclaimed knowledge of the letter, and Massey concluded that it was a supernatural manifestation. He accepted it thankfully, once again he could shut his eyes and whisper "I believe." He so deeply wanted it to be true. It meant that out of all the world, *he* had been selected for special recognition by the Masters of the Universe.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Lillie: *Madame Blavatsky and Her "Theosophy,"* p. 158.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

The matter did not rest there. Skeptics went to work on this new phenomenon. Hurrychund had cultivated the friendship of Mrs. Billing's disgruntled husband, Dr. Billing. Under cross questioning, Mrs. Billing broke down, admitted that Ski had put the envelope in the minute book, and even showed Massey the note from H.P.B. authorizing the deception. When taxed with it, H.P.B. admitted writing the letter quoted above, but stoutly refused to admit any impropriety in the request. The K. H. letter was genuine. What matter how it was delivered? Massey was a key man in her organization. His faith was slipping; something must be done to hold him. The Masters swung into action and wrote thousands of words on the subject. When the argument finally died of exhaustion, Madame had lost the cream of her English following, Massey and a number of his friends. She had also provoked an articulate opposition of a kind that she was least qualified to meet. The London spiritualist weekly, *Light*, was an urbane and literate journal with a sophisticated clientele. Its contributors included a group of young university men, experts at persiflage, at exploiting absurdity, and at satirizing Madame's latest news release. In this guerrilla warfare H.P.B. was at a pitiful disadvantage. Losing her head and her temper, she let her opponents egg her on into extravaganza, into contradicting her own statements and claiming the impossible.

Madame's next setback originated in plain carelessness or weariness. Henry Kiddle, retired New York school principal and lecturer on spiritualism, was surprised, on reading Sinnett's *Occult World* during the summer of 1883, to find nearly a page from one of his own speeches printed as a quotation from Koot Hoomi. Checking back, he found that his speech had been printed in the weekly *Banner of Light* almost a year before the publication of *Occult World*. Kiddle received no reply from Sinnett to a polite inquiry, and his letter to *Light* appeared on September 1, 1883. Beside it in deadly parallel columns stood Koot Hoomi's plagiarism

## HOODOO YEARS

and the corresponding section of the earlier Kiddle speech. The opening sentences indicate the virtual identity of the two texts:

From speech by Henry Kiddle delivered at Lake Pleasant camp meeting, August 15, 1880, *Banner of Light*, September 18, 1880.

My friends, *ideas* rule the world; and as men's minds receive new ideas, laying aside the old and effete, the world advances. Society rests upon them; mighty revolutions spring from them; institutions crumble before their onward march. It is just as impossible to resist their influx, when the time comes as to stay the progress of the tide. . . .

From K. H.'s letter to Sinnett in *Occult World* (published June, 1881), p. 102. N.B. Passage was deleted after 8th edition.

*Ideas rule the world; and as men's minds receive new ideas, laying aside the old and effete, the world will advance, mighty revolutions will spring from them, creeds and even powers will crumble before their onward march, crushed by their irresistible force. It will be just as impossible to resist their influence when the time comes as to stay the progress of the tide. . . .*<sup>4</sup>

With her usual coolness under attack, H.P.B. tried to laugh the matter off: impudent charges brought by fools and Sadducees. "K. H. *plagiarized* from Kiddle! Ye gods and little fishes. . . . If they knew what it was to *dictate mentally* a *Precipitation* as D. Khood says at 300 miles distance. . . . Plagiarize from the *Banner of Light* ! ! ! that sweet spirits' slop-basin—the asses!"<sup>5</sup>

But Madame found herself laughing all alone; this was a serious matter and required explanation. General Morgan, a venerable retired officer, came forward with a defense that did more credit to his heart than to his judgment. He had been permitted "to look behind the veil of the parallel passage mystery, and the whole affair is very satisfactorily explained" . . . all very secret, he could only say that the chela taking dictation from K. H. had stupidly omitted part

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>5</sup> *Letters H.P.B.*, p. 66.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

of it.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately Koot Hoomi himself took up the charges, but merely to say that he had been working too hard. "I was physically very tired by a ride of forty-eight hours consecutively and . . . half asleep. Besides this I had very important business to attend to psychically" . . . and he was not paying close attention. He had been dictating to an inexperienced chela, who asked him to look over the letter and correct it, but "I answered—imprudently, I confess—'Anyhow will do my boy; it is of no great importance if you skip a few words.' " " This was not quite all the story. Some months earlier the Master had been thinking about American spiritualists and, turning his mind in their direction, had received a general impression of what was being said at that moment at the Lake Pleasant camp meeting. Some detached sentences from those speeches had remained impressed on his memory. Hence the unconscious and quite innocent confusion.

*Light* pounced upon the Kiddle charges, and they were taken up by all the spiritualist press. It was the most widely publicized and most damaging blunder H.P.B. had made. When a new edition of *Occult World* went to press, Madame induced Sinnett to add an appendix presenting K. H's alibi letter, General Morgan's letter, and a mass of other material. In the end the Theosophists evidenced their discomfiture by deleting the plagiarized passage.

There was a certain zest to devising alibis for efforts that had misfired, such as the Eglinton and Massey letters, or even to explaining away the Kiddle incident. More nerve-racking for a woman of Madame Blavatsky's unstable temperament was the necessity to deal with the psychopathic personalities that fluttered about her like maudlin moths. Madame's doctrines attracted men and women susceptible to the appeal of psychological phenomena, a group that overlapped into the fields of spiritualism, astrology, Rosi-

<sup>6</sup> *Theosophist*, December 1883.

<sup>7</sup> A. P. Sinnett: *Occult World*, 4th ed., Appendix, p. 145.

## HOODOO YEARS

crucianism, and innumerable esoteric cults. Viewing this group with interest and concern, psychiatrists have given repeated warnings of the potential danger of doctrines that encourage a surrender to fantasy and the exclusion of reality. *Autistic* is the technical word for this escape into fantasy and Dr. Robert A. Clark of Western State Psychiatric Institute, Pittsburgh, writes: "Theosophy . . . carries especial interest for the psychiatrist, because its doctrines in their peculiar autistic richness remind one of the productions of many paranoiacs and schizophrenics, [and] because of the attraction of these doctrines for certain personalities." Jung, Weygandt, and others have called attention to the appeal of occult metaphysics to the psychopathically disposed, and the danger that they may encourage and precipitate latent psychoses, especially paranoid schizophrenia and hysteria.

The annals of the Theosophical Society seem to justify the apprehension of the psychiatrists. Eccentric figures were always turning up to enjoy the spotlight briefly. There was the blue-eyed scion of the distinguished Mitford family of Hampshire, who had turned Mussulman, wore his light brown hair tied in a Grecian knot like a woman, and called himself Mirza Murad Ali Beg. His *Elixir of Life* was featured in the *Theosophist*, and he was consulted as an authority on the wicked devices of the Black Arts until one day in the Wadhwan station, on a journey with H.P.B., he snatched a sword from a sepoy and tried to kill her, screaming that she and her Mahatmas were all devils. Understandably, Madame wasted no sympathy on such cases, writing to Sinnett of "Moorad Ali—who died raving mad, . . . Bishen-lal and other *vain*, weak and selfish characters—who end at the first temptation as raving madmen or commit suicide." Even gentle Master Koot Hoomi was annoyed with them, complaining to Olcott: "Why must I remind you of the three cases of insanity within seven months among lay-chelas, not to mention one's turning a thief?"



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

### 2. THE PHOENIX VENTURE

(1882-3)

Another calamity was impending. The proprietors of the *Pioneer* notified Sinnett in August 1882 that his contract would not be renewed when it expired at the end of another year. His crusading enthusiasm on the side of the angels—Mahatmas—had, they felt, made the paper ridiculous and was pulling down circulation. Their repeated efforts to restrain him had not been effective. Poor Sinnett had been steering a difficult course. On one side he was alienating the owners of his paper; on the other he was hounded by implacable Mahatmas.

Greed for publicity was a weakness with H.P.B. She could not remember that the press, like most men, is coy and backs away if courted too openly. English journals in India were almost unanimously hostile to her, and H.P.B., instead of learning to handle them with finesse, called them barnyard names, such as “that skunk of a sewer,” and worse. Irritated by their insinuations as to her finances and their recurring Russian spy stories, she would dash off a letter to Sinnett calling for another column of propaganda in *The Pioneer*. If he demurred, the Masters stepped in: he must print this—or else. In spite of the frowns of his owners, the ribbing of his associates, his own better judgment, he had given way time and again, and now it had cost him his job. Rushing to the Old Lady in distress, he cried: “What are the Masters going to do about it?” Surely they would not permit such injustice to result from his loyalty and obedience.

Unhesitatingly H.P.B. asserted that the Masters would take care of him; she would keep him in India, come what might. The Hume and Massey defections had hurt her pride, but she would be seriously handicapped by the loss of Sinnett. He knew the ropes, had the entrée, could be flat-

## HOODOO YEARS

tered or bullied into endless publicity. She must have grimaced if she remembered Gerry Brown and her efforts with some New York journalists. She seemed to bestow the kiss of death upon her publicity agents.

Using Sinnett's emergency as her pretext, she launched, during the autumn of 1882, a project she had secretly cherished for years. She would establish her own newspaper, or at least one in which she could be a controlling factor. Ostensibly the Masters sponsored *The Phoenix*. H.P.B. kept in the background and pretended to know nothing except that she had been ordered to help raise money. Master K. H. wrote Sinnett with breezy assurance. It should be an English language newspaper, financed by Indian capital to offset the British controlled press; it should not take more than a few weeks to raise the required five lakhs of rupees (\$170,000) from Indian princes and capitalists. The months slipped by and *The Phoenix* remained nothing but talk. "Not a pie [one-sixth of one cent] had been paid in!" exclaimed H.P.B. Finding his position in *The Pioneer* office embarrassing, Sinnett resigned before his year was up and sailed for England in March, 1883.

On the eve of Sinnett's departure, the Mahatmas bestirred themselves. Occult laws forbade their providing actual cash; neither could they solicit subscriptions. But they made a magnificent gesture. The inaccessible Maha Chohan permitted himself to be interviewed by Koot Hoomi, who forwarded to Sinnett a memorandum written in ornate style, pledging the Chohan's support and suggesting terms for editorial control and division of profit. Beyond this, according to H.P.B.'s letters to Sinnett, she limited herself to interviewing her pet rajahs, who did not respond very well, and to goading Olcott into raising the money single handed.

The Colonel had no more chance of raising \$170,000 than a snowbird, but he knew how to meet difficult situations, bow his head, and let them roar past. He did not over-exert himself to bring back to India a man who had always

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

shown him contemptuous disdain. In his day-by-day account of his tour of India that year, he never mentioned the *Phoenix* venture. Perhaps he never even heard of it!

In addition to the problem of financing the paper, the Masters faced that of securing a public to read it. The slender membership of the Theosophical Society would not carry them far, and they cast about for a cause that needed publicity. Solvent Causes do not grow on every bush. When H.P.B. found her cause, she was ready to make any compromise. But how about Sinnett? Here she had the Master K. H. step in: he described the project as "a plan of action purely Asiatic in character . . . it may be found too Jesuitical to suit your taste." K. H. conceded that the proposition might shock "European, cultured notions of right and wrong . . . a somewhat unclean work—from the European standpoint," but he also reminded Sinnett that the true occultist does not hesitate to sacrifice even his reputation and his honor for the sake of the greater good. He must never forget the existence of occult antidotes beyond his comprehension!

The proposal was astonishingly cynical. The recent defeat of the Ilbert Bill had been followed by an agitation for a rent bill designed to correct gross inequalities of taxation under which the Bengal peasants had suffered for more than a century. The chiefs and zamindars (landlords) of Behar aggressively opposed the new bill and were ready to subscribe one and one half lakhs down, and as much more on Sinnett's return to India, if he would agree to make *The Phoenix* the mouthpiece of their opposition.

Admitting that the zamindars were using "infamous" methods in building their lobby, K. H. argued that there was no more dishonor in an editor's supporting such a group than in a lawyer's accepting a criminal as a client. He reminded Sinnett that a conservative editor who trimmed his sails to conform to a conservative Viceroy's policy would be in an advantageous position for the future. He closed

## HOODOO YEARS

with a threat. If this *Phoenix* project failed, he, K. H., would not be permitted to continue his work with the European element; they were too earthbound, handicapped by their non-ascetic mode of life and their western standards of honor. He would continue to take an interest in Hindus and other Asiatics, but not in Europeans. If Sinnett rejects the zamindar's offer, Sinnett and the Mahatmas "will have to part."

Sinnett was deeply shaken. An experienced newspaper man who had climbed to the top rung in India, forty-three years old, and far from a romantic idealist, he was staggered by the duplicity of K. H.'s letter. He challenged the project on practical grounds. Opposition to the rent bill, he wrote on August 16, 1883, would alienate popular sympathy and ruin their chance of commercial success, "and a paper which is a commercial failure can have very little political weight." He told K. H. that he would feel himself a "blackguard" to accept the proposal and was confident that it would cost him all future political influence.

And yet—and yet, the bleak alternative stared him in the face, as K. H. had mercilessly written it down. If the newspaper failed, "we will have to part." He would lose access to the Masters, which had become the most precious thing in his life. Many a man is subject to this haunting sense of inescapable loneliness. Dance and sing as he may, the night comes to an end, the sun rises, the party is over. It is fear of that ultimate aloneness that drives men and women into fantastic efforts to escape it by means of innumerable devices, liquor, love, mystical visions. In their hearts they are seeking reassurance, something permanent in a world of change. Sinnett, a man of private means who had made a success in his field and was devoted to his wife and son, was so undermined by this need of a support outside himself that he was driven to an extremity of self-abasement. He accepted the zamindars' offer, saying that he would cast the moral responsibility upon the Master K. H.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

But Sinnett had his humiliation for nothing. H.P.B. had no way of swinging such a deal. K. H.'s curious disparagement of the project and Olcott's ignoring it suggest that it may never have existed outside of her imagination, a straw man used to test Sinnett and then be knocked down. Sinnett had stepped into a trap that ought in the future to preclude his talking too much about the code of an English gentleman. Now H.P.B. was concerned only to find a plausible excuse for letting the proposal die. She seized upon a recent letter of Sinnett's to the London *Times* on the political situation in India: no doubt noble and well meant, it had not been well received by the zamindars. As a result a dozen princes had canceled their subscriptions to *The Phoenix*, a total of at least fifty thousand rupees.

On receipt of Sinnett's letter accepting the zamindars' offer, which she was not supposed to read, but to forward to K. H., Madame turned on Sinnett with wilful cruelty. She had just heard in a roundabout way the details of the proposal, she wrote, on September 14, 1883, and she was outraged; had not K. H. himself pronounced it "infamous"? She was only a woman, ignorant of politics, probably a fool about many things, so she had to keep quiet. But she must speak for once because she was horrified. How could he so degrade himself? No one wanted him to return to India more than she, but not at the price of his honor and reputation. Evidently her notions of honor and justice were different from those of some other people! She would rather never see him again, rather ruin the Society, than be a party to such a devilish transaction, starving teeming millions to satisfy the greed of a few Shylocks:

*Je donne ma langue aux chiens [I give up]. Do not blame me. I have done my best, but since the zamindars are preferred, I have nothing more to say. Buss [that's all].*

The final touch of humiliation came when Koot Hoomi coolly announced in September 1883 that the Mahatmas

## HOODOO YEARS

had withdrawn their support of *The Phoenix*. It was Sinnett's fault for saying that he would put the moral responsibility of his decision on the shoulders of K. H. Sinnett had misunderstood the law of Karma, if he imagined that it permitted him to wriggle out of responsibility. No one was allowed to interfere with Sinnett's destiny by helping him reach decisions. At the end, K. H. relented a little and gave the poor man a grain of comfort: he congratulated Sinnett on carrying off a difficult situation well, for he had been quite right in accepting the zamindars' offer. In recognition of his passing this difficult test, the Maha Chohan himself had been pleased to cancel his order forbidding K. H. to continue relations with him. Letters to all other Europeans were forbidden; Sinnett alone was exempt. So much Sinnett had salvaged, but at what a price! <sup>8</sup>

In the course of this *Phoenix* venture, H.P.B. revealed a good deal about herself. She had used the project to establish the reality of the Mahatmas. She did not even know what they were planning and, crowning proof, she completely disagreed with them on the ethics involved. Who could ask for more dramatic evidence that H.P.B. did not write the Mahatmas' letters? The project demonstrated her ruthlessness with her closest associates and supplied another measure of her strange power to hold their faith and loyalty. The venture was particularly significant as an example of the blind-obedience pressure machine in action. Sinnett earned final commendation and reward from the Maha Chohan himself by surrendering his judgment, his will power, his individuality. It is a familiar issue that the world has followed with passionate concern in recent years. Madame's Universal Brotherhood amendment to her constitution sounded well and she used it adroitly, but she was animated by a dictator's will-to-power and she demanded a fascist type of obedience from her devotees.

<sup>8</sup> *Mahatma Letters*, Sec. IV, "The Phoenix Venture," pp. 377-96. *Letters H.P.B.*, p. 85.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

### 3. TIBET

(1882)

Under fire, H.P.B. responded to emergencies with coolness and daring. Between times she surrendered to lamentations and hysterics; she went to bed, wrote farewells to her friends, summoned her doctors and chelas for deathbed scenes. All was over, Bright's disease, blood turning into water and "forming into bags à lá kangaroo," ears swollen, ulcers. She was so nervous that the ghostly patter of Babula's bare feet gave her palpitations that the doctor said might carry her off at any minute. This time, she wrote the *Sinnetts* in September 1882, it really was the end, and she implored them not to remember her as an impostor. Her yammering was in part the expression of a hysterical nature, but it was also a form of magician's patter to distract attention. She was secretly hard at work planning her next act. Impatient and irritable in trivial affairs, she had inexhaustible patience under disaster. The glamour wrapped around occultism disguises the prosaic fact that patience and perseverance are as essential to success in this field as in sport, science, or the arts. H.P.B. owed as much to her indomitable spirit as to any peculiar psychic endowment.

The close of the steamy, depressing hot weather of 1882 found H.P.B. physically exhausted; there had been no invitation to Simla this year to break the long tension of the rains. Yet, smarting under a merciless succession of rebuffs, she had mapped out her next year's program on a more ambitious scale than ever. Adyar would solve all problems. M. Coulomb, the handy man would arrange better facilities for phenomena, and Subba Row close by would advise her on metaphysics and yoga. They were moving to the new home in December 1882. She filled in the interval with a heroic-sized edition of her most successful device for handling Ol-

## HOODOO YEARS

cott. The Masters, instead of coming to see her sent word that they would carry Upasika [H.P.B.] off to Tibet for a month's rest.

The several accounts of the journey in September 1882 are contradictory. H.P.B. insisted on going unattended, but a Voice told Ramaswamier and other chelas to drop everything and follow her. S. Ramaswamier, a minor clerk in the district of Tinevelly, took his chelaship seriously. For two years he had risen at four every morning to meditate for two hours, gazing steadfastly at an iron pin that he sought to move by will power. No luck so far, but perhaps he would gain new reserves of will power on this trip? As it turned out, he was not permitted to enter Tibet. But in Sikkim on the border of British India, he encountered a Mahatma riding horseback and wearing a fur-lined yellow mantle who bespoke him kindly. Ramaswamier's description of his trip, *How a Chela Found his Guru*, became a Theosophical classic.

Even H.P.B. was not privileged to cross the border into Tibet. The Masters Morya and Koot Hoomi met her at a hideout in Sikkim, and the proposed month was whittled down to overnight. This was H.P.B.'s only attempt during her six years' residence in India to appear to enter Tibet, and she did not even cross the border. However, she jauntily described the journey with snatches of nostalgic reminiscence:

*Oh the blessed, blessed two days! It was like the old times. The same kind of wooden hut, a box divided into three compartments for rooms, and standing in a jungle on four pelicans' legs; the same yellow chelas gliding noiselessly; the same eternal gul-gul-gul sound of my Boss' inextinguishable chelum pipe; the old familiar sweet voice of your K. H. (whose voice is still sweeter and face still thinner and more transparent), the same entourage for furniture—skins and yak-tail stuffed pillows and dishes for salt-tea, etc. . . . Boss gives you his love. I saw him last night at the Lama's house.<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>9</sup> Letters H.P.B., p. 38.



## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

For two months H.P.B. stayed on at Darjeeling, which was by no means Tibet, but had to do. As always, a group of Hindu chelas gathered round and she kept them at her feet, mystified and fascinated. At last, rested in body, morale improved, feeling her prestige restored by the journey, she returned to Bombay in November to take leave of the Crow's Nest and accompany her treasures and paraphernalia across India to Adyar. She was bursting with new plans, defiantly ambitious plans that combined the versatility of genius with paranoiac delusions of grandeur.

## CHAPTER XIII



### *THE WORLD IN HER SLING*

(1883—4)

IN less than a decade H.P.B. had climbed from a charity home for working women in the New York slums to a nabob's estate in southern India. An avenue of ancient mango and banyan trees curved lazily up to the porte-cochere; broad verandas supported by white pillars gave an air of tropical opulence. The compound was like a small village with its brick stables, coach house, swimming-bath and godowns (storehouses). Two bungalows on the river bank were used as guesthouses. A plantation of casuarina trees spread greenness and dark shadows across the blazing sunshine. The recent opening of a railway to the Nilgiri Hills, bringing the hill station of Ootacamund, known as Ooty, within easy reach, had thrown several estates on the market. Subba Row had picked this one up for only three thousand dollars, a sum H.P.B. had no trouble in raising among her devotees. On her arrival in December 1882, Madame inspected the compound complacently; after many strange turnings she was coming back at last to something of the pomp and circumstance to which she was born. She had her plans ready for M. Coulomb to go to work at once.

Instead of taking for her own use one of the master bed-

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

rooms on the cooler ground floor or a bungalow on the river bank, H.P.B. chose to remodel a single storage room on the roof. Bricking up a window in the west wall, M. Coulomb built an almirah (cupboard) over the former opening. In this corner H.P.B. hid her bed behind long curtains, rarely used in India because they shut out the air. Against the outside west wall of this room, M. Coulomb built an addition known as the Shrine Room, the heart and center of H.P.B.'s secret plans. Its only door opened into her bedroom; she had the walls covered with red and white striped calico, recalling the red muslin lined closet of the Société Spirite in Cairo. The strips of calico met in the center of the bricked-up window over an opening in the brick work; through it one could reach into the almirah beside H.P.B.'s bed behind the curtains.

In this secret room over the bricked-up window hung the Shrine, the most ambitious of H.P.B.'s efforts to simulate magic and in the end, the cause of greatest grief. The Shrine was a wooden cupboard with doors, made of cedar-wood, lacquered black to look like ebony. It was about four feet high and wide and twelve inches deep. Hanging on four wires from hooks in the ceiling, it was placed so that three sliding panels in the back came over the aperture into the bed alcove. An awning-covered terrace all around the roof gave access to the staircase at the northwest corner; tucked in at the head of these stairs were tiny rooms for H.P.B.'s servant Babula and her most trusted chela, Damodar.

In February 1883, Olcott was sent off on a tour of India (to raise money for *The Phoenix*?) and the mystery of M. Coulomb's hammering and sawing was then revealed. The chelas, carefully indoctrinated, were at last permitted to climb the stairs and approach the Shrine Room. This was holy ground. Long curtains hiding the Shrine were not parted until the kneeling chelas were ready to prostrate themselves and bury their faces in their crossed arms in Oriental fashion.

## THE WORLD IN HER SLING

The Shrine was soon processing Mahatma letters to the faithful half a dozen at a time. Sometimes they answered definite questions, but the majority were benedictions or vague promises of advancement along the paths of occultism. As soon as the letters were running smoothly, H.P.B. planned more ambitious effects. The Colonel, who would return from his tour at the end of May, had not yet seen the Shrine. Although he still believed in the Mahatmas, his enthusiasm for phenomena had cooled, and H.P.B. foresaw that he might be unsympathetic to this latest improvement. It did not really matter, but, like all showmen, H.P.B. was sensitive to audience approval, and she appreciated a certain value in his effort to preserve illusions.

To give Olcott a pleasant first impression of the Shrine, H.P.B. made him the hero of the occasion. Followed by a procession of solemn chelas, H.P.B. ceremoniously led the Colonel up the stairs, through her sitting room, and into the Shrine Room. Slowly the long curtains were drawn back and, in the half-light of flickering wax tapers the Shrine stood revealed. Its doors were opened, incense burned. Salaams, prostrations, puja, the doors were closed . . . more incense and puja . . . again the doors of the Shrine were opened. There stood a pair of slender vases of tortoise shell and lacquer with a message that they were a token of affectionate regard from the Masters to their loyal servant Henry Olcott. The pleasure of standing in the spotlight was sufficient to enable Olcott to pretend that it was all real. Accepting the adulation of the chelas, most of whom he despised, he could forget his humiliations for the moment. Tears welling in his eyes, he hugged the vases close. His voice trembled so that he could not speak.

For the approaching hot weather H.P.B. planned an even more striking demonstration: the Shrine was to function in her absence, proving that she had nothing to do with it, for Madame never seemed to realize that skeptics might easily suspect her of using confederates! She had been in-

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

vited for the hot weather of 1883 to Ooty as the guest of her gallant defender in the Kiddle controversy, Major General Morgan. The General and his wife, enthusiastic spiritualists, hoped that Madame would provide some diverting marvels before the summer was over. They were not disappointed. Ooty, summer capital of southern India, proved even more susceptible than Simla. When H.P.B. made fairy bells tinkle beneath the cummerbund of the Chief Secretary of the Province, the Hon. F. E. Webster, he thrust his hand into the pocket of his white linen dinner coat, and brought forth a letter addressed to himself that he could have sworn was in his own handwriting—except that he had never seen it before. This incident suggests H.P.B.'s skill with handwriting and throws a sidelight on the penmanship controversy over the Mahatma letters.

In London, Sinnett was sitting out an unhappy death watch with *The Phoenix* during that summer of 1883. He had given the Mahatmas a year to get the paper started and had promised to hold himself at their disposal for that period. Under the circumstances, Madame's descriptions of her social triumphs in Ooty must have jarred upon him. He would have been proud, she wrote, to see the Old Lady

*presiding Juno- and Minerva-like over the whole of the Ooty high officials, right up to the Grand Muff [Sir Mountstuart Grant Duff, Governor of Madras] and Mrs. Muff themselves. . . . Everybody here bombarding me with invitations to receptions, balls, dinners . . . kissing my hands, the lioness of the day. My name put on the Government Book in Government House in big letters before I had condescended to return Mrs. G. Duff's visit.*

*My graceful stately person clad in half Tibetan, half nightdress fashion, sitting in the glory of her Calmuck beauty at the Governor's and Carmichaels' dinner parties; H.P.B. positively courted by the aide de camps. Old "Upasika" hanging like a gigantic nightmare on the gracefully rounded elbows of members of the Council in pumps and swallow tail evening dress and silk stockings, smelling brandy and soda enough to kill a Tibetan yak.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> *Letters H.P.B.*, p. 45.

## THE WORLD IN HER SLING

Pleased with herself and with Ooty, Madame repeated her trick de luxe, used only once before to impress Mrs. Sinnett: she duplicated a sapphire ring she was wearing. This time Mrs. Carmichael, wife of Ooty's second-in-command, was the beneficiary. She wanted to join the Theosophists, but her husband objected: "David is afraid." Angling for the Carmichaels, H.P.B. invested in another sapphire, but it was money wasted. Canny David continued to fear, and, as Olcott sourly commented, Mrs. C. kept the ring!

The summer's *coup de théâtre* was reserved for Madame's host, General Morgan. Assuming that he would visit Madras during the summer, H.P.B., before leaving Adyar, impressed upon Madame Coulomb that she must put on her company manners for the General. He would probably drive out to see the portrait of Koot Hoomi hanging in the Shrine. While showing it to him, Madame Coulomb must contrive to knock a china pin tray off the Shrine shelf. In great distress, explaining that it had been especially prized by H.P.B., she would wrap the pieces in a bit of silk, lay them in the Shrine, and close the doors. Later, making an excuse to open the doors, they would find that the Masters had miraculously mended the tray, for there it was to stand as good as new, which indeed it was. The mechanism was very simple: Madame Coulomb bought a pair of identical pin trays. It went off without a hitch, and made a profound impression on the General, whose high rank impressed everyone else.

### 2. PER ASPERA AD ASTRA

(1883)

Three months in the hills, her social success, and the fool-proof performance of the Shrine thus far, combined to give H.P.B. fresh confidence. She could forget the casualties of the previous year when she had struggled around the clock grinding out Theosophical profundities for Hume. What

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

had that gotten her? Better one miraculous pin tray than a cycle of metaphysics.

Winding up his tour of India in time to meet Madame at Ooty in late September 1883, Olcott accompanied her back to Adyar. They were met at all the station stops en route by scores of sick people who crowded about Olcott to be cured by laying on of hands. He had "treated" eight thousand persons in the past year according to his secretary, and was working up a promising side line. For the first time H.P.B. saw her partner the center of these eager, jostling groups, felt the high-strung tension of the occasion. He was flattered by the interest with which she watched him, and may or may not have traced cause and effect when, a few days later, he received an order from the Master to discontinue all further healing as being too much of a strain. Olcott's health was excellent, but one does not argue about orders from the Masters.

Perhaps it was to divert Olcott from this new frustration that H.P.B. entrusted her latest neophyte, William T. Brown, to his care on an autumn tour through the Punjab. Sahibs, even Theosophical sahibs, enjoy the pageantry of white importance in the Orient. Olcott traveled as the President of the Theosophical Society, and was entertained by Indian princes with medieval pomp, elephants and garlands and nautch girls. In British India, he set up his camp or took over the local dak bungalow and made himself comfortable with the elaborate impedimenta standardized by British administrators: not only the Sahib's food, water, bedding, clothing, and mosquito nets, but also his desk, chair, records, books, and papers, all carried as hand luggage by swarming coolies. The Colonel issued Presidential Orders as he went along, combining the circumlocution of the Orient with the rotundity of legal phrases. On this trip, his party included W. T. Brown, the neophyte; the Colonel's secretary; his bearer; Brown's bearer; the staff of coolies picked up at each stop, and H.P.B.'s trusted chela, Damo-

## THE WORLD IN HER SLING

dar, who had won spectacular recognition as an initiate. In his astral body Damodar made nightly trips to the ashrama of his Master in Tibet. He could also be depended upon to report to H.P.B. any irregularities or breaches of the Master's orders.

Advance schedules of these tours were published in *The Theosophist*, and several months earlier the Colonel had agreed to treat two paralyzed boys at Moradabad. Now, by order of the Mahatmas, he must arbitrarily refuse to touch them. Olcott was hardened to this sort of thing, and grimly persisted that he could do nothing in spite of the grief-stricken family weeping at his feet. This was too much for Damodar, who offered to visit Adyar (one thousand miles distant) that night and ask H.P.B. to intercede with the Masters. When ready to make his aerial flight, Damodar went into a room by himself. A few minutes later he rejoined the party saying that he had been to Adyar and had talked to Madame. Sure enough, the next day, November 10, 1883, Damodar received a telegram from Master Morya:

*Henry can try the parties once, leaving strongly mesmerized  
Cajapati oil to rub in three times daily to relieve sufferers. Karma  
cannot be interfered with.*

M.

After that the supernormal crackled over Olcott's party like live wires flashing in a storm. They reached Lahore and the grand climax on November 19. After salaams, addresses of welcome, bouquets, and garlands at the railroad station, they were escorted to their camp, six tents and four shami-anahs pitched on the maidan north of the city. That night, roused from sleep by a hand on his arm, Olcott heard the words "Do you not remember me?" and recognized the mild tones of K. H. It was indeed the Master, Koot Hoomi, who passed from tent to tent, waking them, insisting that they remain quietly in bed, chatting briefly with each one in his kind, sweet voice, leaving with each a letter wrapped Oriental fashion in a square of silk, and stealing away swiftly



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

before they were well awake. Olcott was jubilant. Brown, more reserved, was also swept off his feet. Attentions from the Masters had almost a currency value among the Theosophical elite. A had twice seen the Masters, but at a distance; B, three times; C was a four-letter man. This Lahore experience was unique and put the trio in a class by themselves. The Adventures in Wonderland continued, and Damodar was singled out for further marvels: a series of exclusive interviews with the Master lasting three hours each and, finally, his own disappearance for forty-eight hours. On his return he told them briefly that he had made a flying trip to Tibet.

In spite of H.P.B.'s insistence upon a long and arduous apprenticeship, the Mahatmas played favorites shamelessly. If H.P.B. took a fancy to a man, anything could happen—and did. It caused heartburning and unhappiness. Sinnett, far away in London, read in *The Theosophist* about the extraordinary favors showered upon Brown, and wrote in sharply: he had never been permitted even to see a Master, in spite of years of devoted service. How about it? H.P.B. took the line that the Masters did as they pleased, and that she was as much put out as Sinnett. "Why should Brown be so favored?" she echoed. "He may be a good man but what the devil has he done so holy and good?" She hinted at sinister omens, earthquakes and a blue-and-green sun. "Ye gods and powers of hell, we didn't have work and trouble enough!" she complained.

Olcott and Brown promptly turned their experiences into propaganda, describing the visit of Koot Hoomi over and over again, working themselves into a mounting fervor. The privilege of beholding and conversing with a Master was the supreme joy life could offer, Olcott told his audiences, for in his benign presence the mind and heart expanded like a flower in the sun:

He is there, standing beside my bed, his face aglow with a smile; I see it in the chiaroscuro of the back-light . . . his noble

## THE WORLD IN HER SLING

form lingers an instant in the tent door and he gives a last friendly glance to me and is gone. It is not much as to time, but its memory will last my life through.<sup>2</sup>

Olcott, Brown, and Damodar returned to Adyar as exalted as though from a mount of transfiguration. The props were starkly simple: a candlelit glimpse, while half-awake, of a figure swathed in draperies and uttering platitudes had been transmuted into a moment of ecstasy. In spite of the extraordinary dispensations, Brown's faith was short-lived. For a few months he wrote and lectured ardently. But H.P.B.'s constant use of coincidence, the alleged misunderstandings to explain away recurring charges of fraud, wore him down. Before long he angrily repudiated Theosophy and tried a succession of Rosicrucian and occultist cults, one after another. He ended his quest in the arms of the Roman Catholic Church. He always remembered his moments of ecstasy, but they were a curdled memory, and he denounced H.P.B. with the bitterness of a man who knew that he had made himself ridiculous.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. "IT IS ALL GLAMOUR"

(1883-4)

The bold but crooked line of Madame Blavatsky's adventurous life reached its apogee in the years 1883-4. She had now established herself in a handsome estate. She had founded a magazine that, supplemented by the contributions of devotees, paid her a comfortable living. She had organized the Theosophical Society, which remained chiefly a talking-point, something to publish her magazine about—for its membership continued as anemic as in the United States. Among the Indians the Society appealed to a limited white-collar group, many of whom watched with raised eyebrows as this Western woman fumbled with their doctrines and

<sup>2</sup> Olcott: *O.D.L.*, III, 40.

<sup>3</sup> W T. Brown: *My Life*.

*Religio-Philosophical Journal*, July 23, 1887.

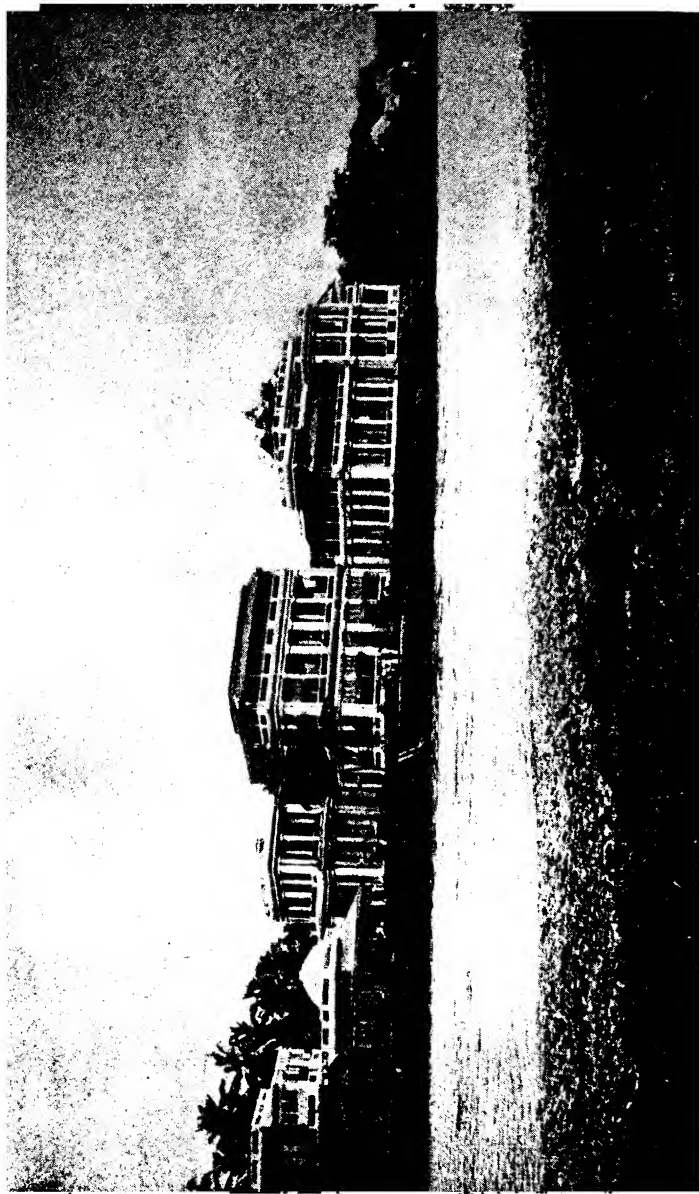
## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

claimed to achieve unprecedented powers. It was the British in India who, in spite of her poor start, furnished most of her dues-paying members and her international prestige. She was already beginning to be a world figure, making Adyar a port of call for globe-trotters with mystical leanings, authors, lecturers, *cognoscenti*.

The enduring fame of H.P.B. and her distinctive contribution lay in the field of occultism. Despite her floundering, she originated or adapted several daring innovations: a hierarchy of supernatural Mahatmas; a cosmology offering comfort to the frustrated: reincarnation, a chance to come back to this world and show them, and magic, its lure and appeal restored to a drab and materialistic world; an astral postoffice bringing the Mahatmas very near, and a Shrine where the Mahatmas performed miracles.

Only the first two features have survived. The Shrine lasted less than two years. The astral postoffice became an instrument of such flagrant fraud that it was outlawed shortly after Madame's death. Depending largely on H.P.B.'s power of suggestion, on legerdemain, and on the use of confederates, her phenomena could not survive her as an effective system. Her use of phenomena and her treatment of the abstraction Truth are basic points in judging her life and achievement. Boldly she took the text "There is no religion higher than the Truth" as the motto of her Society.

If her phenomena had been authentic, the world might well have granted her the instant acclaim it gave, half a century later, to phenomena involving more revolutionary values than even she dared to imagine, the use of atomic energy. H.P.B.'s phenomena were not true, and it is not possible to believe that her claims were made in good faith. The verdict upon Madame Blavatsky must hinge upon these two facts. It is nonetheless an object lesson in the resourcefulness of human nature to trace her fantastic devices, her flashes of genius alternating with total lack of



*In 1882 Madame Blavatsky moved the Theosophical headquarters to Adyar, near Madras, and there they have remained*



*Portrait of Madame Blavatsky by Schmiechen, painted in London  
in 1884*

## THE WORLD IN HER SLING

human insight, and, over all, the magnetic charm that enabled this strange Old Woman to build herself into a world figure balanced upon something even less substantial than a house of cards.

Although the legend of her phenomena creates a helpful atmosphere, it is the writings and philosophy of H.P.B. that command allegiance today. Scholars dismiss her major works as jumbles of inaccurate borrowings. Such criticism is immaterial. H.P.B. reached back to the basic human appeal that makes Superman—very like her Mahatmas—a superfavorite in the funnies, that makes children love Santa Claus and fairy tales, and that makes primitive people everywhere believe in goblins, ghosts, and magic. Another vital element in Madame's system was the establishment of her own dictatorial power. Painfully the world has learned how far and how fast mediocre men can go under this system. Instead of stormtroopers, Madame used a hierarchy of marionette Mahatmas with the secret strings all in her own hands. Theosophists, being dreamers and intellectuals, are not sufficiently ruthless to make the most of the pattern.

At some time during her six years in India, H.P.B. abandoned her original quest for the ultimate secrets of occultism. She had imagined them as neatly set out as a diplomatic code, hidden away like a pirate's buried treasure. With mellow cynicism she had come to realize that these arcana existed chiefly in the eyes of the beholder. She tried to protect her credulous followers from disillusionment, but she could not resist startling more sophisticated friends by deliberately letting the cat out of the bag.

Moncure Conway, Virginia born, Harvard educated, had so charmed a group of English liberals that they brought him to London during the 1860's to build up a Unitarian congregation at the South Place Chapel. H.P.B., en route from New York to India, met Mr. and Mrs. Conway through some spiritualists, members of his church. Mrs. Conway had not liked Madame, but with Conway there was

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

an instant click: he found her amusing, entertaining. She had the air, he said, of a woman who had tried every experience. In 1883 on his way round the world Conway remembered Madame, and visited Adyar. After dinner, she took him and her chelas upstairs to see the Shrine, but by order of the Masters there were no phenomena that evening. Presently, H.P.B. dismissed her little flock of sheep; closing the door of her sitting room, she and Conway lit cigarettes and settled back for a frank talk. Hoping that she might relent, Conway expressed his keen disappointment about the phenomena. He told her that his congregation was a picked group of liberals, always hospitable to new ideas and deeply interested in her work, and he asked her to tell him the truth about her marvels. H.P.B. looked him straight in the eyes and waited while she puffed her cigarette. She began deliberately, picking her words; he was a public teacher and she was going to tell him the truth:

It is all glamour. People think they see what they do not see.  
That is the whole of it.

Conway was impressed by the sincerity of her manner, but commented that she left unanswered the problem of how to cast the glamour! Nor did it escape him that she was not so indiscreet as to make this statement before witnesses.\*

Very rarely, with perhaps half a dozen men, did Madame drop the domino that a high priestess of occultism must wear. Her dropping it at all proved that this past master of making others believe did not fool herself. On the contrary, except for her rages, she maintained a certain detachment, watching life with a wry humor. She tried to choose her confidants carefully among the cynical and disillusioned, but she met few men as utterly without illusions as herself. She once told her Russian friend, Solovyov:

The vast majority of people who are reckoned clever . . . are hopeless fools. If you only knew what lions and eagles in every

\* Moncure Conway: *My Pilgrimage to the Wise Men of the East*, p. 194.

## THE WORLD IN HER SLING

part of the world have turned into asses at my whistle, and have obediently wagged their long ears in time as I piped the tune.<sup>5</sup>

Texas Guinan, a New York night-club hostess of the 1920's, greeted everyone with the magical phrase "Hello Sucker"; all the tired business men and their not-so-tired ladies loved it. H.P.B. knew how to use this appeal with an Old-World subtlety and allure.

While Fortune smiled, H.P.B. again visited Europe in spite of the difficulty of leaving Adyar. The Shrine must be protected from prying eyes, and delegation of authority bred conflict. Ignoring bitter protests, H.P.B. as usual turned everything over to the Coulombs—funds, purchasing power, supervision of servants, even custody of the Shrine. As a concession to an inflammable situation, she left at Adyar her pet chela, Damodar, with orders to keep her informed and to do what he could to restrain Madame Coulomb.

Madame's party included the Colonel, her chela, Mohini Chatterji, and her servant Babula. Like Damodar, Mohini was a Brahman; unlike Damodar, he was a graduate of the University of Calcutta, and a young man of exceptional charm with finely modeled head and light brunette coloring. The rigors of his ascetic training had left a detachment of manner, a wistfulness of melting brown eyes that vastly intrigued the ladies. He wore his exotic robes and his crisp, fastidious turbans with distinction. He became a pioneer Swami in western drawing rooms.

In spite of the rush of final preparations, H.P.B. made time to go sightseeing with a just-arrived neophyte from the American Far West, Dr. Franz Hartmann of Denver, Colorado, German-born, physician, author, philosopher, and Rosicrucian, one of the ablest of the Theosophists. He had been lured half way around the globe by reading Madame Blavatsky's magazine and Sinnett's *Occult World*. She car-

<sup>5</sup> Solovyoff: *M.P.I.*, p. 72.



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

ried him off in February 1884, to visit some of her rajahs, the Thakur Sahib of Wadhwan and Prince Harisinghji. These visits worked two ways: the Westerners were impressed by the titles and pomp of the princelings, and, white prestige being what it is or was, the rajahs were delighted to entertain distinguished Europeans. On such occasions H.P.B. was liberal with phenomena, and her hosts usually made cash contributions to the Cause before she left. These visits were an important source of revenue, especially for such unbudgeted items as a sudden trip to Europe.

Olcott was in Ceylon; the Sinhalese were paying his expenses in return for his presenting their petition on religious-political grievances to the Foreign Office in London. Stopping off at Adyar, the Colonel tried to appease the unhappy compound by appointing a committee of trustees to be nominally responsible in the absence of the Founders and to cope with the summary powers H.P.B. had granted to Madame Coulomb. This committee included Dr. Hartmann; Saint George Lane Fox, London engineer, wealthy, mystical, another newly arrived neophyte; Damodar; Subba Row, and Monsieur Coulomb!

Awaiting H.P.B. in Nice, where she landed on March 12, 1884, were invitations to visit several titled ladies, aspirants in occultism. The scales were tipping. Curiosity about Madame's phenomena outweighed the outraged morality that had ostracised her. Attended by her cavaliers and servant, H.P.B. began her tour of European bigwigs by visiting Lady Caithness, the Duchesse de Pomar in her magnificent *hôtel*. At last Madame had breached the walls of the Fauborg Saint-Germain!

A life-sized portrait of Mary, Queen of Scots, dominated the ducal drawing room, and Lady Caithness told H.P.B. the dramatic story of an interview that had changed her whole life. This famous Queen, dead for three centuries, had returned to earth for the sole purpose of talking with

## THE WORLD IN HER SLING

her. It had happened ten years earlier, when the Duchesse, a young widow, was living in Caithness Castle, Edinburgh. Following instructions received from Queen Mary in a dream, with only one attendant, she slipped out one midnight into a waiting cab and was driven to the chapel of Holyrood Castle. After a long and intimate conversation, the Queen informed Lady Caithness that she was her Guardian Angel and kissed her on the forehead. The Duchesse took a solemn vow and consecrated the rest of her life to God.

Eager to promote interest in Theosophy among the "right sort of people," Lady Caithness invited to meet H.P.B. all the blue-blooded mystics and near-mystics of Paris, and a few fashionable non-mystics. Ascending the palatial staircase, announced by footmen in powdered wigs and satin breeches, the Old Guard of Paris traversed the vast drawing rooms to bow before My Lady, wearing diamonds the size of pigeons' eggs—and beside her, Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. To compete with the diamonds, H.P.B. had ready some well-planned effects. Mohini, exotic and svelte, created a sensation wherever they went by prostrating himself upon the floor when Madame entered or left the room; the sly Babula in bare feet and a flutter of white draperies glided in and out of Madame's presence on mysterious errands. The Fauborg Saint-Germain watched through lorgnettes and monocles as closely as good manners permitted. A writer in *Gil Blas* described the affair in a chastened tone, surprisingly respectful for a Parisian of the Boulevards. They had been accustomed to laugh at Theosophy, wrote the Frenchman, "but I laugh no more." Certainly he was not converted, "but I am disarmed, you will see why." He described H.P.B. discreetly as "a remarkable woman." In spite of her hoydenish manner she had, he thought, a certain aristocratic look. Her dress was most peculiar, a loose black wrapper, something like a child's smock or a priest's cassock. With the ease of

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

a *grande dame* from Russia, she had smoked cigarettes all the evening while presenting a convincing case for Theosophy to the men clustered about her, *avocats, professeurs, docteurs*, "all aristocrats" and, before she was through with them, "all believers." In the end, "a cup of tea and a smile from Lady Caithness brought us back to reality and I thought, Paris is a place full of surprises. Who would have thought that in the Fauborg Germaine, full of old prejudices. . . ?" <sup>6</sup>

Monumental, ungainly, H.P.B. sat back upon the gilts and brocades of the Paris salons and watched the antics of the blasé fashionables crowding around her chair; her hoarse voice boomed out over their high-keyed superlatives and affectations. At heart Madame was a snob, and she valued social recognition greedily, but with her head she despised it, and sometimes, to intimates, she said so:

*Allez donc!* You are a lot of weak, cowardly *Grundyists*, a flock of *moutons de Panurge* following your Jockey-club scented leaders, and no more! She took care not to let them see her scorn; they were useful, and she worked hard to win their approval. As she moved from one great house to another, her retinue performed its exotic routine. Countesses followed her across Europe on the chance of seeing her alone for an hour. Bemused young university men took off on secret missions, returning eagerly to whisper messages in her ear. On a shoestring she had set herself upon a throne where she held the full glare of the spotlight, not by her phenomena alone, but by virtue of her rich personality. Detached from her cheap and dishonest confederates, from her strange itch to involve herself in petty politics and quarrels, she had a warmth of human understanding, a rollicking humor, and a fund of wisdom that accounted for part of her amazing power over people.

As a hospitable gesture Lady Caithness leased for H.P.B. an apartment on the Left Bank for the summer of 1884.

<sup>6</sup> *Gil Blas*, Paris, May 7, 1884.

## THE WORLD IN HER SLING

Here Madame established her little court, with people constantly coming and going: Bertram and Arch Keightley, eager young Englishmen who could not wait for her to reach London; Olcott's former clerk, William Q. Judge, discouraged and at loose ends, through with America and en route to Adyar for the rest of his life, as he thought; Madame's sister and aunt direct from Russia—whom she had not seen for more than a decade; another compatriot, the brilliant journalist Solovyov, and oh! the luxury of talking Russian again. When she was surrounded by her new friends, did her mind ever carry her back thirty years to Paris in the mid-fifties and to young Baron Meyendorf and D. D. Home?

But now H.P.B. was eager to be off to London; she wanted to see what she had left there since the Ski fiasco and the loss of Mr. Massey. A year earlier, shortly after Sinnett's return to London, he had published a second book, *Esoteric Buddhism*, which presented the Theosophical cosmology as outlined in the letters from the Mahatmas. Heavier reading than *The Occult World*, it did not run through as many editions, but it was seized upon eagerly by the "serious thinkers."

An investigation by the Society for Psychical Research also served both to attract and repel H.P.B. On hearing that the Founders were to visit London, the Society appointed a committee to investigate Theosophical claims, and the Colonel and Mohini had already gone over to answer questions. She had no qualms about Olcott. He did not know anything really damaging; he had never been allowed to have a key to the Shrine or even to the Shrine Room, and he had repeated his stories of her Simla successes until he reeled them off like a child speaking a piece. In the end, Madame also submitted to being interviewed, but she refused to attempt to demonstrate any phenomena. It would affront the Masters. She was cautious about competent critics.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

Most of all, H.P.B. was eager to know how the London Theosophical Society was prospering under its new President, the brilliant and beautiful Dr. Anna Kingsford. Threatened with the collapse of the British branch, H.P.B. had endorsed the Presidency of this woman, who had her own following and could bring new blood to the Society, but it had been a reluctant concession because she did not like working with women and frequently ridiculed them in her writings.

Dr. Anna Kingsford shared H.P.B.'s yen for the Unknown, and in addition, possessed many superficial qualities of leadership that the Russian lacked. She had taken the degree of Doctor of Medicine at the University of Paris; she was fifteen years H.P.B.'s junior—in her late 30's—wore her clothes well, observed the ordinary conventions, and was better looking than H.P.B. had ever been. Inheriting independent means from her father, a prosperous London ship-owner, she possessed not only an amiable husband, the Reverend Algernon Kingsford, who remained in the background, but also a devoted cavalier, collaborator, and biographer, Edward Maitland. Dr. Kingsford had charming platform manners and a flair for crusading causes, such as the horrors of vivisection. She also had mystical leanings, a vivid imagination, and impassioned memories of visions and illuminations; she had received three nocturnal visits from Saint Mary Magdalene. She herself was a reincarnation of Anne Boleyn.

From the outset, H.P.B. was jealous, referring to Anna as "that hypocritical she-devil" or, in milder mood, "the divine whistle-breeches." Poor old H.P.B., in spite of her slovenly appearance and her high rank as an occultist, revealed in her brief encounter with Dr. Kingsford that she was still subject to the corroding effects of feminine vanity. Fatuously she harped on Dr. Kingsford's appearance; how could Anna, "the mystic of the century," confabulate with unseen gods when she persisted in wearing so much jewelry

## THE WORLD IN HER SLING

that she looked like the front window of a Delhi jeweller? Even if she was a fascinating woman, why should she dress her beautiful golden hair to look like the mitre of the *dugpa* (evil spirit), Dashatu Lama and wear a dress to Sinnett's party that made her look like the black-and-yellow zebra in the menagerie of the Maharajah of Kashmir? And what possessed her to paint her beautiful arms black up to the shoulders? The answer to the last question was that Anna had worn shoulder length black mousquetaire gloves. But there was no satisfactory answer for H.P.B. She did not trust Theosophists "loaded with jewelry like a Greek corpse," and was more concerned about their having true Theosophy in their hearts.

Kind friends reported these amusing remarks to Anna, who was much too clever to reply in kind. Instead, she shot straight into the bull's eye by attacking the authenticity of the Mahatmas as interpreted by Sinnett in his last book. She was an adroit antagonist, and selected her targets with intelligence. She twitted H.P.B. on adopting reincarnation as an afterthought, having really borrowed the idea from herself and Edward Maitland! She dissented from Madame's low estimate of women, and she protested vehemently against the anti-Christian tone of the Adyar propaganda, for Anna, however she might pile on the trimmings, was at heart a fervent Christian mystic. Sinnett, who wanted to get rid of Dr. Kingsford so that he could be president himself, waited hopefully for the thunderbolts to descend upon Anna's heresies. But the Mahatmas held their peace. After all, she was an intimate friend of the Duchesse de Pomar. With Maitland hovering over her, she continued to preside with charm and brilliance over the London Lodge, as she had renamed the branch, dropping the word Theosophy, but maintaining the connection with the parent society.

It was at a London Lodge meeting on June 30, 1884, the air charged with psychic dynamite, that H.P.B., supposed to be in Paris, walked in unannounced. At the moment, Sin-

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

nett was making a speech on a controversial issue. The Colonel and Mohini were seated in the front row. The instant that Madame appeared in the doorway, the exotic Mohini glided swiftly down the full length of the room, prostrated himself on the floor before her, and kissed the hem of her skirt. Sinnett was forgotten as his entire audience craned their necks to watch the tableau. Before she was inside the room, H.P.B. had stolen the show. Mohini had received a special letter from the Master Koot Hoomi coaching him for such occasions; he must not mind the gaping Westerners. "You have to *stun* them. You will meet and receive her as though you were in India." In contrast to his humility before H.P.B., Mohini avoided shaking hands with either men or women because of the contamination of unclean Western habits; instead he gravely joined the palms of his hands, salaaming in Eastern fashion. Mohini's obeisance before H.P.B. proved contagious; emotional women and impressionable men fell to their knees and fumbled with the hem of her trailing skirts. Her chance remarks were repeated and treasured. People boasted of the number of seconds she had paused in passing.

In spite of Sinnett's disappointment over the *Phoenix* venture and other recent humiliations at the hands of the Masters, he was again stage-managing as he had in Simla, striving to make Theosophy acceptable to "the best people." H.P.B. and Babula stayed at his house, while the Colonel and Mohini were guests of Miss Arundale. Lunches, receptions, *conversaziones* crowded in upon them. They met literary London: Sir Edwin Arnold, Robert Browning, and leading scientists, Crookes, Barrett, Podmore, Myers. The Founders reached the pinnacle of their glory at a reception at Prince's Hall on the evening of July 19, 1884. Once again Madame permitted herself to be corseted into black satin. Looped round and round her neck and over her ample bosom lay the heavy golden chain on which she once used to lead her Russian wolfhound. The

## THE WORLD IN HER SLING

company included the Under-Secretary of State for India, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, ambassadors and diplomats, Members of Parliament, titles, the intelligentsia. Madame's social rehabilitation was more amazing than her making people believe in Mahatmas; it was the most spectacular achievement of her career. For this was Queen Victoria's London, where *divorcées* were cast into outer darkness and where women were so pure that supposedly they had never even heard of bigamists and lights-o'-love.



## CHAPTER XIV



### THE COULOMB LETTERS

(1884)

EVEN without second sight H.P.B. could have read the handwriting on the wall, for every mailboat brought her warnings from Adyar. The ormolu and gilt of the Paris salons, the gold and glitter of the *beau monde* were tarnishing under a film of fear. She had barely left India before the factions bottled up in the compound were bombarding her with complaints.

When Dr. Hartmann as chairman called together the trustees at Adyar, he suggested that they meet in H.P.B.'s sitting room, for Theosophists, believing that psychic rays emanate from a person's aura, would naturally find special virtue in their guru's apartment. The Coulombs, however, had secret instructions to lock the staircase door leading to the apartment, and admit no one. Madame Coulomb had aggravated the trustees' irritation by her insulting manner.

The letters from Adyar ranged from annoyance to virulence. Lane-Fox and Dr. Hartmann wrote in righteous indignation. Regarding Adyar as a place of holy retreat, they had come to it as on a pilgrimage, and were chagrined to find

## THE COULOMB LETTERS

the compound teeming with intrigue and hatred. Solemnly they warned H.P.B. that Madame Coulomb was a traitor and should be turned out instantly. She was maliciously undermining Theosophy and the Mahatmas with her jeers; she told everyone that her husband was building trapdoors and apparatus in the Shrine Room for more trick phenomena, and even claimed that one purpose of the Society was to overthrow British rule in India. She had also spread stories of H.P.B.'s past and a M. Metrovitch, of money H.P.B. had borrowed in Cairo and never returned. She hinted that she could tell much more if she wished. The trustees demanded her immediate discharge, unaware that H.P.B. had tolerated her sabotage for several years.

Damodar's letter was written in anguish. He was a callow, inexperienced lad, skeleton-thin, ungainly, with sunken cheeks, lantern jaw, and a fanatical glitter in his reproachful brown eyes. Even H.P.B. used to laugh at his lead pencil legs. Taking his responsibility to protect Madame's interests very seriously, he hovered about the edges of the battlefield like a wraith.

Madame Coulomb's attitude was frank blackmail. When H.P.B. was away visiting Simla, Ooty, and her Indian Rajahs she used to write Madame Coulomb instructions for timing phenomena to be produced in her absence or synchronized with her own magical effects. Madame Coulomb had accumulated about forty of these letters, and her threat to publish them arrived while H.P.B. was the guest of Lady Caithness. H.P.B. cabled back: "What can be done? Telegraph." Then, secluding herself in her Paris apartment, H.P.B., on April 1, 1884, wrote Madame Coulomb a long, pleading letter, utilizing every possible appeal: flattery, self-interest, ambition, and friendship. She acknowledged gratefully Madame Coulomb's helping her in Cairo and her continuing assistance! Permitting herself only the gentlest of reproaches, she hammered home one point: nothing was to be gained by destroying H.P.B. If Madame Coulomb made

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

it impossible for her to return to India, she, H.P.B., could always establish her Mahatmas elsewhere. Adyar had no monopoly on the gods. (See Appendix H, page 328.)

With clever *double entendres*, H.P.B. maintained appearances. There was nothing compromising in this letter, but she knew that she had not been discreet in the past and that she was at Madame Coulomb's mercy. The letter was a tumultuous and moving plea, but it was too late. Matters had moved too swiftly for the slow come and go of the mail steamers.

Hot weather closed in relentlessly, intensifying the nightmare atmosphere of the compound. It had long been rumored that Madame Coulomb raided the household funds left in her charge, and the Sahibs now pounced upon her accounts and found them out of balance. They were using this as an excuse for ejecting the Coulombs without waiting for authorization from H.P.B. In the nick of time, the Master Koot Hoomi intervened on March 22 with a letter to Damodar urging the trustees to err on the side of mercy: the woman was only a poor spiritualistic medium and therefore not in control of her faculties or responsible for what she did. (See Appendix I, page 330.)

It is the opinion of handwriting experts that this K. H. letter was written by Damodar; he realized that only the Mahatmas could stay the swift march of events. The letter bears witness to H.P.B.'s ability to inspire her followers with dynamic loyalty. Damodar, a timid, cringing creature, here took the initiative, improvised a creditable imitation of H.P.B.'s imitation of what a Mahatma might be supposed to say, and valiantly used it to dominate and restrain the white Sahibs. The Sahibs, confident in their righteous indignation, were brought up short by the letter. After a stunned moment, they accepted it and solemnly undertook to do what the Mahatma ordered, be gentle and patient and show the Coulombs more consideration. But there is more than one way to skin a cat. The Sahibs undertook to

## THE COULOMB LETTERS

get rid of the Coulombs by luring them to the other side of the world. Dr. Hartmann offered them a gold-mine claim in Colorado, and the Sahibs would chip in their traveling expense. The offer was accepted, passage engaged. At the last minute the Coulombs decided that they were letting the rich Sahibs off too cheaply and demanded an additional thousand dollars in cash. If it was not forthcoming, they would publish H.P.B.'s compromising letters.

The Hindu chelas had heard Madame Coulomb muttering about these letters for months. Subba Row—lawyer as well as philosopher—had forehandedly written H.P.B. in the early spring to ask whether Madame Coulomb could have anything really damaging, and if so, urging an immediate cash settlement with the woman as the only way out. True to her policy of never admitting anything, H.P.B. airily insisted that there was nothing to worry about. Now the trustees were alarmed all over again by the demand for a thousand dollars, and termed it blackmail in a cable to H.P.B., who was by then established with her retinue on the handsome estate of the Count and Countess d'Adhemar at Enghien. Exasperated, she cabled a go-ahead, and the trustees at a special board meeting expelled the Coulombs from the Society and ordered them off the compound. During the ensuing back-chat the Sahib Saint George Lane-Fox lost his temper and swung at M. Coulomb or, according to another account, slapped the policeman summoned by the Coulombs to protect them. The distinguished Lane-Fox was hauled off to the police court and fined for assault and battery, which must have made the Coulombs feel a little less badly about their ejection.

And still the compound continued to seethe. Damodar now had the key to H.P.B.'s rooms, and he proved as stiff-necked and objectionable as the Coulombs. Irritably the white sahibs discontinued their lessons in the secrets of occultism from the Hindu chelas. The heat and rains and rigors of hot-weather Madras, almost on the equator, beat

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

them down mercilessly. The headquarters of Universal Brotherhood was rent in twain by a grim lineup of Europeans against Hindus.

If H.P.B. had returned to India by the next steamer, she could still have patched things up, but the intoxicating fragrance of social rehabilitation bewitched her. Simla and Ooty ceased to exist, mere pretentious colonial capitals. She had moved to a larger stage, to problems of greater moment. A fashionable artist, Schmiechen, was doing her portrait; he was also painting the Masters, not from life to be sure, but by a process of thought transference from H.P.B. And she must keep an eye on the future. She had made her comeback as a wonder-worker. The marvels could not cease or lose their novelty; she was always seeking new ideas, new confederates.

In this crowded summer of 1884 she took time for a brief and intensive interlude with a newcomer, a woman this time, and an American, Laura Holloway, just arrived in London. Having read Sinnett's *Occult World*, Mrs. Holloway aspired to become a pupil of the Master K. H. She was young, attractive, ardent, and—best of all—a medium. Originally the guest of Miss Arundale, Mrs. Holloway so captivated the Sinnetts that they invited her to visit them. On the evening of July 6 she held a memorable private séance for the Sinnetts alone. After she had passed into a trance, the Master Koot Hoomi took possession of her and spoke directly in the first person to her hosts. Infatuated with the Mahatma concept, Sinnett had suffered tortures of jealousy of the Ferns, Browns and other transient and often shoddy favorites. Now at last, after years of effort and sacrifice, he had achieved the firsthand recognition and contact with the Master hitherto denied him. He was in ecstasy.

At this crucial moment H.P.B. arrived in England from her Paris triumphs, and at once went about demolishing Sinnett's cardboard castle. Sensing that he was concealing

## THE COULOMB LETTERS

something, she soon confirmed her suspicions. Hastily she arranged that Laura Holloway should collaborate with her attractive chela Mohini in writing a book. She made it a condition that Laura leave the Sinnetts and return to Miss Arundale. Not that it mattered to her; it was an order of the Masters. She could not imagine what difference it made to them, but one can not argue, etc.

Having bribed Laura with joint authorship of an anonymous book of dreary moonshine,<sup>1</sup> H.P.B. tried to sow discord by making Sinnett jealous of Laura, who, she said, was plotting to monopolize future messages from the Master K. H. and step into Sinnett's shoes as a Theosophical literary light. Madame's strategy did not work and she faced a crisis. If the Masters escaped from her control, her game was up. The Masters wrote letters in all directions. Mrs. Holloway must sleep at Miss Arundale's *every* night, no visiting around; as for those pretended messages from K. H. that Sinnett had received at Laura's séance, they were a fraud, the work of *dugpas* (evil spirits). The Master wrote soothingly to Laura: he realized that she was quite innocent in the matter, but she had been tricked by overwhelming powers. It was not the Master but a Devil who had spoken through her. There were the usual threats of excommunication for failing to appreciate and obey our devoted and loyal servant, H.P.B.

Sinnett was not to be intimidated. He had heard those threats before, and the next week the Masters would forget them. Sinnett issued an ultimatum of his own. Mrs. Holloway would remain as a guest in his house or else he would leave the Society. Staggered but resourceful, H.P.B. tucked Laura under her wing and on July 24, 1884, rushed off to Germany, followed by her Court. She undertook to build up Laura, binding her as an assistant-in-chief to her own side, where she could keep an eye on her. The Masters approved and wrote eulogies of Laura's ability and brilliant

<sup>1</sup> Two Chelas: *Man, Fragments of Forgotten History*.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

future, vaguely suggesting her as a successor to H.P.B. when the day came.

This time H.P.B. had gone too far. Once sure of a man, she had an urge to "treat him rough," and she had grown too sure of Sinnett. Never had she permitted him to see or speak to a Master; she had put him over the jumps in the *Phoenix* venture, and had denied him the justice of an answer from the Masters to Dr. Kingsford's attack on his last book. On tiptoe in H.P.B.'s absence, he had contrived to put a call through to his beloved Koot Hoomi, using Laura as the telephone central. When H.P.B. tried to tear out the phantom switchboard, Sinnett rebelled. The emotional drive that had made it possible for him to accept H.P.B.'s vagaries for five years now enabled him to cast her off.

Magically the scales fell from his eyes. K. H. wrote several angry letters insisting that Laura move back to Miss Arundale's, but they rang false and Sinnett knew that the Old Lady had written them.<sup>2</sup> Sinnett regained his earlier normal outlook except in one detail. To the end of his long life he continued to believe in the Mahatmas and to communicate with them through mediums in trance. It was the dammed-up emotion of Sinnett's thwarted need to come closer to his Masters that forced him to recognize that H.P.B. was an impostor. But she had drawn her fantasy figures with such consummate skill, with such knowledge of the human heart that after repudiating her, Sinnett could still retain inviolate his belief in her Mahatmas. Even in his repudiation of Madame, Sinnett paid her tribute.

2. S.O.S.

(1884)

In the midst of her English ovation Madame had dashed off to visit her German friends, the Gebhards; she wanted

<sup>2</sup> A. P. Sinnett: *Early Days of Theosophy in Europe*, pp. 61-2.

## THE COULOMB LETTERS

to take Laura away from the Sinnetts and, in addition, she had plans for Germany. She would add another pearl to her string of international sections, and the Gebhards were her grain of sand in the German oyster. They were a large family, prominent, wealthy, occultists in one degree or another, keeping open house on a handsome estate in Elberfeld. Herr Consul Gebhard had recently returned from a diplomatic post in the United States. Frau Gebhard, English born, friend of the Sinnetts, a kind and gracious woman, was one of the rare genuine mystics in H.P.B.'s circle. For seven years she and the Baron Spedalieri had studied with the famous old Kabbalist, the Abbé Constant, known in occult circles as Eliphas Lévi. They were the only pupils he considered worthy of his time and effort. Besides delving deeply into folk lore, superstitions, and the classics of occultism, Frau Gebhard had found self-expression in a rigid discipline. In later years the demands of family life had compelled her to forego the old austerities, but the cumulative discipline of life itself had brought her added wisdom and understanding.

From July to September 1884 H.P.B., her relatives, her chelas, and her staff occupied the Gebhard home. Minor celebrities from all over the world came and went: F. W. H. Myers, English psychologist and pioneer in the application of scientific standards to the study of hypnotism and hallucination; his friend Solovyov, the Russian journalist who had been having an affair with H.P.B.'s sister, Vera; Dr. Elliott Coues, eminent biologist from Washington, D. C., General D. O. Howard, U. S. Army; the Countess von Spreiti and Frau Max, sisters of Dr. Hartmann, who was still chairing the board of trustees in Adyar; the Countess Wachtmeister, English-born widow of a Swedish diplomat; Herr Doktor Hübbe-Schleiden, diplomat and historian, who became President of the newly organized German branch of the Theosophical Society.

It was a tense and uneasy summer with a sense of catas-



## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

trophe waiting in the wings, or perhaps it was the astral body of Madame Coulomb and the terrorizing question: What will she do next? H.P.B. kept herself going under high tension; she must gauge the degree of personal attention required by all the jealous members of her retinue, not only from herself, but from each of the Mahatmas. Phenomena multiplied; letters from the Masters materialized on tables, in bureau drawers, fell down from behind massive gilt picture frames, even pelted the head of the prospective president, Hübbe-Schleiden, in a railway carriage. Growing more jittery with the passing weeks, H.P.B. suffered an attack of gout and vented her rage on her intimates. The Colonel, who had learned not to flinch, set down in his diary one of his rare critical comments. On August 24th he wrote with eloquent brevity: "H.P.B. savage."

After a last shrill warning from Damodar, the blow fell in September. Newspaper dispatches from Calcutta announced the publication of compromising letters written by Madame Blavatsky to a confederate, Madame Coulomb; a cabled summary of the letters indicated that the supposedly supernatural phenomena had been planned in advance and executed by very human hands.

They were the letters that Madame Coulomb had been peddling for months and that Subba Row had advised H.P.B. to purchase. They were finally published by Madras missionaries who had old scores to settle. These letters, written in H.P.B.'s own cynical, vigorous style, stripped the mystery from her phenomena and left exposed a miscellany of childish tricks. Some high-ranking British faces, tanned though they were by desert suns, must have burned at being exposed as dupes of such crude devices.

To create the illusion of a Master strolling through the compound, H.P.B. had used M. Coulomb or Babula as confederates, slipping over their shoulders a dummy figure that she nicknamed Christophe or Christofolo. In a narra-

## THE COULOMB LETTERS

tive accompanying the letters, Madame Coulomb described making the dummy. H.P.B. had sketched and cut out a cloth model of a face; after Mme Coulomb stuffed and sewed it up, H.P.B. with a few deft touches of her paint brush made it quite lifelike. This head, swathed in a turban, was fastened to a pair of jackets; between the two, wrote Madame Coulomb, "I placed stuffing to form the shoulders and chest; the arms were only to the elbow, because when the thing was tried on, we found the long arm would be in the way of him who had to carry it."<sup>3</sup>

Christofolo the First met a tragic fate. While the Founders were in Simla, Madame Coulomb burned him up in a rage and mentioned the deed in her next letter to Simla. "Oh my poor Christofolo," wrote H.P.B. in reply. "Then he is dead and you have killed him? Oh my dear friend, if you only knew how much I should like to see him revive. . . . My blessing on my poor Christofolo. Ever yours, H.P.B." Madame Coulomb soon relented, and H.P.B. found consolation in Christofolo II, who was even more lifelike than his predecessor.

A typical letter directed Madame Coulomb to deliver to Damodar an enclosure from the Master K. H. The breathless mixture of French and English conveyed a sense of H.P.B.'s excitement; she could snatch only a minute, and "je vous supplie faites parvenir cette lettre (here enclosed) à Damodar *in a miraculous way*. It is *very* important. Oh, ma chère, que je suis donc malhereuse . . . Tòute à vous, H.P.B." Theosophists have interpreted this letter as absolving Damodar from the charge of collusion. Rather, it illustrates H.P.B.'s efforts to keep up the morale of her chelas. She appreciated the importance of face-saving, of providing plausible excuses for connivance in fraud. Her favorite explanation was "saving power." The Mahatmas could per-

<sup>3</sup> Mme E. Coulomb: *Some Accounts of my Intercourse with Madame Blavatsky from 1872 to 1884*.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

form all these marvels unaided, but why trouble when it was so easy for a chela to be helpful? The Mahatmas had only so much power, why waste it?

With Madame Coulomb, H.P.B. did not trouble to play a part, writing to her with an easy familiarity that suggests two cynical women in cahoots. Expert in flattery, she bestowed suave French titles upon the forlorn Coulobms: they were Marquis and Marquise. Several letters of instruction related to the pin tray that satisfied poor old General Morgan of H.P.B.'s miraculous powers. They show her at work weeks in advance to secure casual, just-happened-so, effects, trusting to her powers of suggestion to push people into position. The pin tray incident depended on the General's coming to Madras during the summer. If he had not come, there would have been no miracle and no harm done. H.P.B. showed, too, a certain thriftiness with her magic. Confident that the pin tray was to be especially impressive, even rivalling the Simla cup and saucer, she cautioned Madame Coulomb to try to arrange for an additional audience of "respectable persons" whose names signed to an affidavit would be more impressive than "our own familiar muffs and domestic imbeciles." (See Appendix J, page 331.) On August 10, 1883 came the go ahead signal:

*My dear Madame Coulomb and Marquis:*

*This is the moment for us to come out—do not let us hide ourselves. The General is leaving this for Madras on business. He will be there on Monday, and will remain there two days. He is President of the Society here, and wishes to see the Shrine. It is probable that he will put some question, or perhaps he may be contented with looking. But it is certain that he expects a phenomenon for he told me so. In the first case beg K. H. whom you see every day or Christofolo, to keep up the honour of the family. Tell him that a flower will be sufficient, and that si le pot de chambre cassait [if the pot breaks] under its load of curiosity, it would be well to replace it at once.*

*The others be damned; this is worth its weight in gold. For the love of God—or of anyone you please—do not miss this oppor-*

## THE COULOMB LETTERS

tunity, for we shall never have another. I am not there, and that is the beauty of the thing. I rely on you, and beg you not to disappoint me, for all my projects and my future depend on you—for I am going to have a house here, where I can spend six months of the year, and it shall be mine for the society, and you shall no longer suffer from the heat as you do now, but this if I succeed). . . . This is the proper time to do something. Turn the General's head and he will do anything for you, especially if you are with him at the same time as Christophe. . . .

Heartily yours,

LUNA MELANCONICA.

Enclosed in the letter was what H.P.B. called an "*en cas*," a message from K. H. "in case" the General wanted an immediate reply to a question. The "*en cas*" was adroitly worded to meet any contingency. It read: "I can say nothing now—and I will let you know at Ooty. K. H."

In spite of months of warning, publication of the Coulomb letters in the *London Times* and on the Continent found H.P.B. with no settled line of defense. Her first impulse was to cry forgery: "I have never written two lines to her (Madame Coulomb)"; and again:

I swear by the Master whom I serve faithfully, and for the sake of carrying whose orders I suffer now, let Him curse me in the future birth, aye, in a dozen of births, if I have ever done anything on my own hook, if I have ever written one line of these infernal letters. I care not for the experts; I care not for the missionaries, court, jury or the devil on earth himself . . . *I have not written the "Coulomb letters."*<sup>4</sup>

Madame Blavatsky rushed back to London to be near Sinnett. Never mind about Laura now and the Masters' ultimata. It is a pleasant note in a sordid picture that though Sinnett had suffered deeply and was disillusioned about H.P.B., he did help her valiantly, conducting a skilful publicity campaign on her behalf. He pointed out that her picturesque style was as unmistakable as a thumbprint, whereupon she admitted writing the original letters, but clung to

<sup>4</sup> Annie Besant: *H. P. Blavatsky and the Masters of Wisdom*, p. 68.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

the forgery defense, claiming that Madame Coulomb had twisted sentences and interpolated words to change their meaning.

In the midst of feverish tension, a new danger confronted H.P.B. The Society for Psychical Research was sending an investigator to Adyar to study on the spot conditions associated with her phenomena and to issue a public report. In the interests of Truth, H.P.B. must appear to welcome the man and give him every assistance. For two months she stayed on in London groping for a plan of action. She wanted to run away, and she toyed with a mysterious disappearance. It would excite interest, perhaps sympathy; it might cause a reaction in her favor. She wrote to Solovyov: "I will go to China, to Tibet, to the devil if I must, where nobody will see me or know where I am . . . and I wish it to be thought that I am dead." <sup>5</sup> Only Olcott was to know her whereabouts; in her heart she knew that she could trust her whipping-boy to the bitter end. After a year or two she would reappear with a story of adventures marvelous enough to pique curiosity and restore Theosophical prestige. This plan, she told Solovyov, was not her own: it had come to her as an order issued and signed by the Master Morya himself.

One important detail prevented H.P.B. from carrying out this order. She did not have the money! Two years earlier the Mahatmas had proposed carrying her off to Tibet for a month. Now they offered her no refuge. She had nothing more to say about the wooden hut standing in the jungle on pelican's legs and the eternal gul-gul-gul of her Boss's chelum pipe. Master Koot Hoomi added his usual red and blue pencil scrawls to H.P.B.'s letters, but they sounded off key. He told Solovyov that "*la situation est furieusement sérieuse*," and he cursed Olcott for a fool, "*mais il n'y en a pas d'autre*" [but there is nobody else]. In this hour of her greatest need, the Masters of H.P.B.'s universe stood around

<sup>5</sup> Solovyoff: *M.P.I.*, p. 94.

## THE COULOMB LETTERS

as embarrassed and helpless as a prospective father waiting in a hospital corridor.

This was no time for bluffing about the Masters. H.P.B.'s only hope lay in offers of help from her disciples; they must get no silly notion that the Mahatmas would come to the rescue. Her Elberfeld courtiers had scattered in all directions: Babula had been hurried back to Adyar with Colonel Olcott. Sister Vera and the aunt returned to Russia after a quarrel over Solovyov. Laura Holloway, a great disappointment, had been glad to escape from H.P.B. back to the United States. Mohini no longer prostrated himself before his guru, but quietly slid out of the picture to begin a career of his own as a guru. Through all the storm and stress, the satire of press and pamphleteers, the mocking gossip, H.P.B. not only held the loyal support of a residuum of disciples, but actually continued to sign up new recruits.

When she set sail from Liverpool on November 11, 1884, she was escorted by eager new disciples, the Cooper-Oakleys, he a Cambridge man, she a writer. Carried away by enthusiasm for a noble woman, victim of malicious persecution, the Cooper-Oakleys sold their home in England, burned their bridges, and were going to India to serve H.P.B. for the rest of their lives. As it turned out, the climate did not agree with Mrs. Cooper-Oakley, and she returned to England after only five months.

An old friend of H.P.B.'s, the medium Eglinton, was instrumental in securing another recruit. Eglinton was now a fashionable institution with a dizzy clientele of titles right up to and including the Prime Minister, Mr. Gladstone; even H.P.B. secretly attended his séances. Perhaps in memory of the Vega letters, which had turned out so badly, Eglinton undertook to forward a letter from one of his clerical customers to the Master Koot Hoomi. And so it happened that H.P.B. took back to India with her a middle-aged curate named Leadbeater. He was a man of excellent family and university connections, and had an imposing presence,

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

a glint in his eyes, and a pointed beard suggesting Mephistopheles. He was an abnormal and dangerous person. Diverted by her new courtier's wit and good manners, H.P.B., instead of hurrying back to Adyar, took time at this critical juncture for an excursion to Ceylon. She wanted the satisfaction of shaking this curate in the faces of her antagonists. "Discredit these vile Calvinistic missionaries," she wrote. With a fanfare of publicity, Leadbeater renounced Christianity, took *pansil*, and became a Buddhist. It is ironic that in her hatred of the Christian church, H.P.B. sponsored this damaged ex-curate, who cost the Theosophists more members and did more to wreck the Society after her death than all their other enemies put together.

Attended by her Buddhist neophyte and by the Cooper-Oakleys, H.P.B. finally reached Adyar on December 21. Richard Hodgson, investigator for the Society for Psychical Research had been at work for four days. That night, tucked once more into her own bed behind the long curtains, H.P.B. thought back wistfully to the splendor and pomp of her visits to the Almanach de Gotha. Midnight was striking, and Cinderella had tarried too long at the ball. In the scramble she lost more than a silver slipper.

## CHAPTER XV



# *REPORT OF THE SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH*

*(1885—6)*

THE REPORT of the Society for Psychical Research, published in December 1885, marked a turning point in H.P.B's life. From then on her appeal was confined to a slightly different public, no less fashionable, but less critical, more easily dominated by their emotions. Previously she had attracted, though she could not hold, a leaven of the intellectually curious. Her timing had been most fortunate.

Two decades of sensational spiritualistic phenomena provided a fertile field of general information. Popular interest in the achievements of science was almost equally helpful. The public had been educated by a period of revolutionary scientific progress to accept new marvels without cavil. The epoch-making revelations of Darwin and Spencer were followed by spectacular demonstrations of applied science. In 1866, Cyrus Field opened cable communication between the United States and England; in 1872 Edison perfected his duplex telegraph; in 1875 Alexander Graham Bell spoke over the telephone the famous first words: "What hath God wrought?"; in 1877 Edison played "Mary had a little lamb"



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

on his first phonograph; in 1879 a horseless gasoline carriage was registered at the Patent Office. After such precedents, he would be churlish who denied that almost anything might, and does, happen!

Seeking to extend the field of authentic information, a group of Oxford and Cambridge students joined older scholars in the late 70's to form a Phasmatalogical Society, reorganizing themselves in 1882 into the more ambitious Society for Psychical Research. Looking over the membership list, H.P.B.'s eyes had glittered because it included so many names that she coveted: the Prime Minister, Mr. Gladstone; Lord Tennyson; John Ruskin; Arthur Balfour; Sir William Crookes; Alfred Russel Wallace; Oliver Lodge; William James. It also included most of the men who, after brief experience of H.P.B.'s azure eyes, had already broken or would soon break away, and of a few who had never succumbed. Their names brought back a long vista of fencing, maneuvering, explaining, memories gay and bitter, chiefly bitter: the Hon. Alexander Aksakov; C. C. Massey; Edward Maitland, cavalier to Anna Kingsford; Saint George Lane-Fox; Colonel Bundy, editor of the *Religio-Philosophical Journal* of Chicago, which had ridden her pretty hard; Dr. Hübbe-Schleiden, briefly President of the German section.

The committee appointed by the Psychical Researchers early in 1884 to interview Founders and chelas during their visit to London had hoped to observe Theosophical phenomena at first hand, a request that was indignantly denied by H.P.B. as affronting the dignity of the Masters. Publication of the Coulomb letters gave a new and sensational turn to the investigation. Special funds were volunteered, and a young Cambridge man, Richard Hodgson, B.A., Scholar of Saint John's College, was dispatched to Adyar to make an on-the-spot study.

Because the Report was catastrophic for Madame Blavatsky, Theosophists have done their best to discredit the man who wrote it. Richard Hodgson was a pioneer in the effort

## SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

to make honest women of psychical phenomena by taking them out of the realm of old wives' tales and by establishing their authenticity under rigid scientific investigation. Hodgson worked for the British Society for Psychical Research until 1890, when William James selected him from a number of candidates and brought him to Boston as secretary-treasurer of the newly organized American branch of the Society. Hodgson was widely and favorably known in this country, and served the Society for twenty-five years, until his death in 1905. William James wrote of him that he was "a man among men anywhere," and that he had that "happy, sober and righteous form of energy which his face proclaimed . . . when a man's pursuit makes his face shine and grow handsome, you may be sure it is a worthy one."<sup>1</sup> Walter Franklin Prince, another authority, paid impressive tribute to Hodgson a quarter-century after his death in a symposium published by Clark University.<sup>2</sup> Assuming that the field of psychical research is a bog, wrote Dr. Prince, he considered Hodgson uncommonly fitted by mental constitution and equipment to build a road across that bog; he was a man "of keen and logical intellect, author of historic exposures of fraud, co-author of the finest demonstration of the possibilities of mal-observation and memory aberration in existence, unusually versed in the methodology of fraud and deception."

Hodgson's Report opened with a statement of the Theosophical claims that had challenged investigation.<sup>3</sup> Madame Blavatsky alleged that members of a Tibetan brotherhood had acquired supernormal powers enabling them to perform wonders impossible to ordinary men. These Brothers, also known as Masters or Mahatmas, took a special interest

<sup>1</sup> William James: *Memories and Studies*, p. 194.

<sup>2</sup> Clark University Symposium, *Case for and against Psychical Belief*, p. 183.

<sup>3</sup> Society for Psychical Research, *Proceedings*, Vol. III (1885), part 9; Vol. IX, parts 24, 25. Society for Psychical Research, *Journal*, June 1884, April 1885, June 1886, etc.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

in the Theosophical Society. Using Madame Blavatsky as their sole intermediary, they had caused their apparitions or astral bodies to appear in places far distant from their human bodies, talking intelligibly, leaving material mementos such as letters, turbans, and dishes. In addition to the Mahatmas and H.P.B., chelas also made projections of their astral forms, notably Mr. Damodar K. Mavalankar.

The Society wanted evidence on: the existence of the Mahatmas; the authenticity of the alleged supernormal powers of Madame Blavatsky and of the chelas. Types of phenomena were listed for investigation: transportation through solid matter of objects such as letters and cigarettes; precipitation of handwriting and drawings on blank paper, and evocation of sounds, raps, and music without the use of physical instruments. The Committee also charged Hodgson to investigate the credibility of witnesses, especially the chelas; to examine sites of phenomena—walls, ceilings, and trapdoors—for evidence of fraud; to check the Coulomb letters and any other relevant items.

When Madame Blavatsky took forgery as her defense, she also pledged herself to sue the missionaries for instigating the plot against her. Forgery was a familiar cry to Theosophists. H.P.B.'s succession of short-lived favorites usually crashed because of bungling her instructions or otherwise betraying her; there were frequent embarrassing letters to disavow, and they were always forgeries. Fern, Eglinton, and the other mediums had to keep quiet; they had been conniving in fraud and had no comeback. With Madame Coulomb it was less simple. She was so far down that she had nothing to lose, freely admitting her complicity. Moreover, H.P.B.'s charge was fantastic. Imitation of a signature requires an expert's hand; forging entire letters requires a skill that would presumably have been applied to more profitable projects. Nor was it only the manual dexterity. If Madame Coulomb had the wit to write these letters, a brilliant reproduction of H.P.B.'s whimsical style, she would

## SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

scarcely have been wasting her time as the slovenly and rebellious housekeeper on a compound in southern India. If she produced these letters she was, commented Arthur Lilie, "the greatest master of refined mockery since Voltaire."

Charges of forgery were complicated by H.P.B.'s naïve boasting about her own skill in this field, as when she mystified the Ooty official with a letter addressed to himself in his own handwriting (p. 204). H.P.B. told other stories that reached back to her childhood: she claimed to have begun when about nine years old, continuing until she was fifteen, to write letters every night from the spirit of a Frau Lebendorf. The letters, said H.P.B., though written by her own childish hand, were distinctly in Frau Lebendorf's "clear, old-fashioned, peculiar handwriting and grammar . . . accumulating in these six years to a heap of manuscript that would have filled ten volumes."<sup>4</sup>

Hodgson wanted an analysis of the handwriting of the Mahatma letters as well as those from H.P.B. to Madame Coulomb, but he could not at first secure adequate samples. Theosophists have made much of the experts' failure to identify some of Koot Hoomi's scribbled postscripts in red and blue pencil as having been written by H.P.B. They ignore the very positive identification made by the same experts when Hodgson secured from Mr. Hume some of the voluminous Mahatma letters and also some of H.P.B.'s. Hodgson submitted his samples to two of the foremost handwriting experts of the day, Mr. Sims of the British Museum and Mr. Netherclift. The bundle of letters to Madame Coulomb and the Mahatma letters, all fastened together, were endorsed: "The whole of the writings contained in this packet are by the hand of Mme. Blavatsky whether acknowledged to be genuine or otherwise."

Theosophists have also kept alive the exaggerated stories of a missionary plot. H.P.B. charged that the missionaries raised a large fund to fight her, paid the Coulombs \$3,300

<sup>4</sup> A. O. Hume: *Hints on Esoteric Theosophy*, p. 120.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

for the letters, and put them on a salary of \$1,500 a year. "I have learned the whole extent and magnitude of the conspiracy against the belief in the Mahatmas; it was a question of life or death to the Missions in India, and they thought that by killing me they would kill Theosophy. . . . How terribly they will be laughed at some day. *En attendant*, they are busy crucifying me, it seems."<sup>5</sup>

The idea is flattering to the Theosophical ego, but the missionaries never took the Theosophists seriously enough to warrant such an elaborate offensive. The Reverend George Patterson, Editor of the *Christian College Magazine*, wrote a dignified and sensible introduction in publishing the letters. Madame Coulomb had brought in the letters; they did not buy them outright, but paid a total of fifty dollars for their use and later returned them. They expurgated the passages printed and deleted H.P.B.'s contemptuous references to General Morgan and other associates as uselessly offensive. Of the forty letters brought to them, they published less than half, using only material that supported their charge that the phenomena were fraudulent.

Reaching Adyar on December 18, 1884, Hodgson asked first to see the Shrine, but was refused permission by Damodar. No one could be admitted to the second floor without special orders from Madame Blavatsky, who was still in Ceylon. When she arrived, the compound was in a fever of plots and rumors, and the Shrine had disappeared. Nobody admitted knowing what had happened, but it was suggested that the Coulombs and the missionaries had stolen it. The truth was that the Theosophists in a panic had burned it. After patient probing, Hodgson secured from Dr. Hartmann a statement of what had happened.

The Shrine had been accepted on faith. The Indians, prostrating themselves before it, buried their faces in their hands as before an idol; Europeans were prevented from in-

<sup>5</sup> *Letters H.P.B.*, p. 99.



*Leading Theosophists after Madame Blavatsky's death. Front row: Colonel Olcott,  
Chautose Wachsmoister Annie Besant Theosophical Society*



*Countess Constance Wachtmeister, English-born widow of a  
Swedish diplomat*

## SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

specting it by the chelas' superstitious awe and fear of "desecration." Dr. Hartmann summed it up in a burst of exasperation: "Nobody was allowed to touch that damned Shrine."<sup>6</sup> Damodar, succeeding to the custody of the second floor when the Coulombs left, had stood off everyone until the publication of the Coulomb letters. The trustees had then insisted on inspecting the Shrine to prove, as they fondly believed, that the charges were false. Reluctantly Damodar unlocked the door, and the party swept up the stairs.

Eagerly they lifted the Shrine down and stood it on the floor. One of the group struck the back of it with his hand, exclaiming: "You see, it is quite solid," whereupon a middle panel, controlled by a spring, flew up in his face. In consternation, they hid the guilty thing in Damodar's room overnight. They did not know how to get rid of it: a bonfire might be noticed and remembered. The following night under cover of darkness, it was carried to a far corner of the compound, where William Q. Judge, as he subsequently admitted, took the initiative in destroying it. In the presence of Dr. Hartmann and another unnamed Theosophist, Judge hacked the magical cabinet apart and they patiently burned it, one small piece at a time.

Eventually Hodgson gained admittance to the secret room, but the Shrine was gone, the walls were freshly plastered, and, as Damodar ~~savagely~~ <sup>snugly</sup> remarked, there was nothing left for him to see. The Theosophists had succumbed to hysterical confusion, failing to realize that their destruction of evidence was tantamount to a confession of guilt as conspirators. They tried to justify themselves on the ground that M. Coulomb had built incriminating contraptions in the Shrine Room, unknown to H.P.B. and after her departure for Europe, as part of the plot against her. Under Hodgson's examination this defense did not stand up any better than the others. Nor did it account for the

<sup>6</sup> Society for Psychical Research, *Proceedings*, Vol. III, part 9.



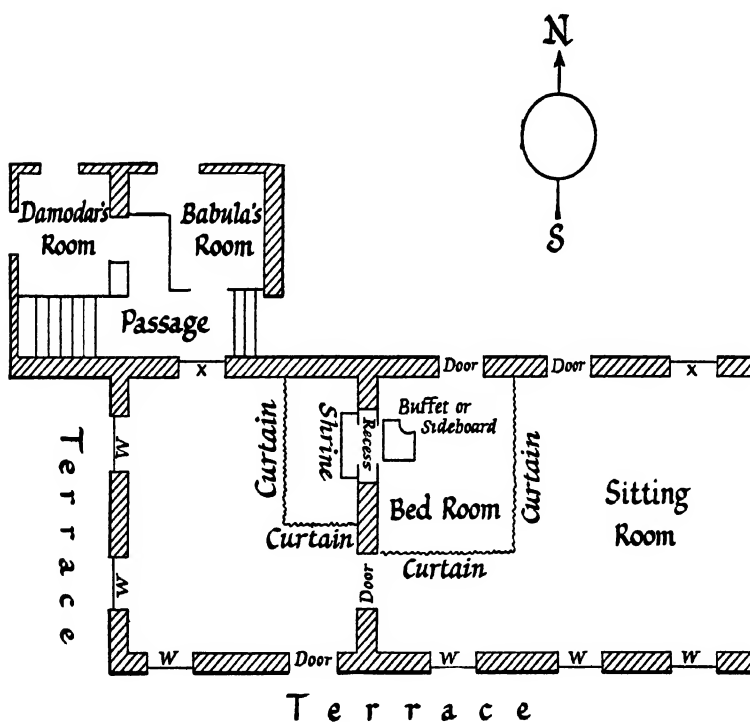
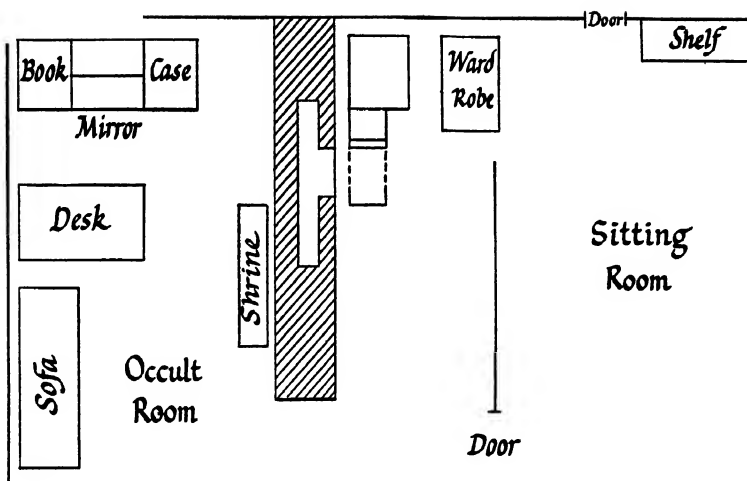
## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

Shrine. H.P.B. admitted to Hodgson that it had sliding panels, though zealous apologists have tried to deny the fact. H.P.B. said that she provided the panels in order that "the Shrine might be more easily taken to pieces and packed in case of removal." The explanation fails to explain. H.P.B. took no other precautions for moving, and had in fact settled down at Adyar presumably for the rest of her life. Even accepting the excuse does not help, because the frame of the Shrine was solid; sliding panels up and down the back of a solid cupboard four feet square would not make it easier to pack.

The Indian chelas banded together to thwart Hodgson, but several European Theosophists refused to join the conspiracy. One of the latter showed him, hidden away in a godown, the window frame that had stood in the opening between H.P.B's bed-alcove and the back of the Shrine. Hodgson built duplicates of the missing equipment, using, where needed, estimated dimensions furnished by Dr. Hartmann. He found that objects were easily handed back and forth through the twelve-inch recess behind the Shrine and that it could be operated precisely according to H.P.B's instructions in the disputed letters to Madame Coulomb.

Comparison of two floor plans of Madame's apartment illustrates Theosophical evasiveness. The Hodgson plan was prepared by Mr. Hodgson with the assistance of Dr. Hartmann, Mr. Hume and others, and may be accepted as reliable. It will be observed that the plan prepared by Mr. Judge omits all details which might be incriminating.

In the neighboring French settlement of Saint-Thomé, named long ago for the doubting Saint Thomas, Hodgson went to call on the Coulombs. As the three sat talking in a modest bungalow, something white grazed Hodgson's head and fell at his feet. It was a letter addressed to him, and it commented on the subject they were at the moment discussing—premonitions. Madame Coulomb explained that although they had not stirred for the past ten minutes, they



Floor plans of the secret room and shrine, Adyar  
Above, Mr. Judge's plan; below, Mr. Hodgson's plan



## SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

had "precipitated" the letter, and by the same means used by H.P.B. The ceilings of this bungalow, like the Theosophical dwellings in Adyar and Bombay, were supported by beams, the spaces between filled in with blocks of wood and mortar. At the junction of a long beam with crossblocks, M. Coulomb had scraped out part of the mortar, just enough so that a letter could slide in to lie flat on the beam. A thread tied loosely around the letter ran across the ceiling, through an open door, and around the corner. Hodgson had been invited to take a chair placed directly under the beam. When M. Coulomb casually introduced the subject of premonitions, Madame Coulomb called to her dog, a prearranged signal; a servant standing out of sight on the verandah pulled the thread and the letter fell. The servant had only to pick up the thread to remove all evidence of this bit of magic. The Latins had a phrase for it, *deus ex machina*, which meant originally the simple machinery used in the ancient Roman theatre for showing gods moving about in the air.

In the course of his investigation, Hodgson visited the stores where Madame Coulomb claimed to have bought stage properties for H.P.B. He found a receipt book notation of the delivery at Adyar on May 25, 1883, of a pair of vases that dovetailed neatly with the entry in Olcott's diary for May 26; he had that day returned from his tour and was delighted with the pair of vases presented to him by the Masters. In another shop Hodgson found a sales memorandum of the sale to Madame Coulomb on July 3, 1883, of a pair of pin trays. This was a day or two before H.P.B. left for her summer in Ooty; presumably the identical second tray was substituted for the broken pieces of the first, deposited in the Shrine, thereby securing General Morgan as H.P.B.'s impassioned defender.

Even here, on their native heath, the Mahatmas remained aloof and refused to perform for the investigation. Hodgson, however, questioned every eye-witness of previ-

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

ous phenomena he could reach; the contradictions in the resulting accounts conformed to the temperaments and emotional dispositions of the individuals. The witnesses may be classified in four groups:

**SKEPTICS.** A minority; men interested in psychic phenomena who were able to withstand or throw off H.P.B.'s power of suggestion. Hume and Massey, in this class, gave Hodgson important information and helpful clues.

**COMMITTED BUT SUSPICIOUS.** Another minority; men like Subba Row, who had drifted along, fascinated by H.P.B., becoming more deeply involved than they realized; when the test came, H.P.B. had failed to alter their standards, and they joined the skeptics in offering Hodgson every assistance in discovering the truth.

**CONVERTS.** A majority; most of them seeking escape from fears, affronts to their pride, a sense of guilt for old sins, dark things they had dragged through the years. H.P.B.'s insidious attack upon the world's accepted standards of honor encountered feeble resistance because they were emotionally absorbed in a proffered short-cut to Security. So Olcott, Sinnett, and Mohini could ignore good naturedly H.P.B.'s peccadillos, her childish pretensions, her bungled phenomena.

**CONFEDERATES.** Beginning with the Coulombs, Babula, and Damodar, the Report identified half a dozen; there may have been more. Indians, Europeans, chelas, and lay-chelas, they did as they were told and asked no questions. Most of them were on the payroll. H.P.B. ruled them ambidextrously, through glamour and through fear. They worked under abnormal tension; several came to suicide and other disastrous ends. Distinguishing between the confederates, Hodgson discarded Babula's evidence as completely untrustworthy. Damodar, though not on the payroll, was a neurotic, unstable lad whose personal difficulties made him a problem child from first to last.

## SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

The investigation was conducted quietly, diplomatically. In spite of the prejudice against him, Hodgson secured fair co-operation from the Europeans and from the more intelligent Indians. The crowning tribute to Hodgson was penned by H.P.B. herself on March 17, 1885, when, at the end of his three months of intensive work, she described him to Sinnett as "an excellent, truthful, expert young man."<sup>7</sup> She continued to think well of him until she saw his report!

On the basis of Hodgson's two-hundred-page report, his Committee publicly sponsored the following conclusions:

- that the so-called Coulomb letters were written by Madame Blavatsky;
- that the Mahatma letters were also written by Madame Blavatsky;
- that Madame Blavatsky used sliding panels in the back of her Shrine for the insertion of letters and other objects;
- a strong presumption that all evidence of the existence of the Mahatmas and their occult powers may be explained as due either to deliberate deception by H.P.B. or to hallucination and unconscious misrepresentation by witnesses.

The Report considered all the important incidents and controversies in which Theosophists had been involved. In the Kiddle case it found that "proof of deliberate plagiarism, aggravated by a fictitious defense is irresistible." It examined the Massey-Ski fiasco at length, using evidence supplied by Mr. Massey. It doubted Madame's claims to residence and training in Tibet, and pointed out that such claims were very recent. Hodgson concluded that the Russian spy charges had some foundation in fact, and that they supplied the only adequate motive for her ten years of unremitting toil. He dismissed the ambition to establish a world religion as a motive because her personality defects "removed her ineffably from the Saint Theresa type." He

<sup>7</sup> *Mahatma Letters*, p. 473.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

may have overdiscounted her interest in her own brand of religion. Madame heartily enjoyed exercising the power of a cult leader. On the other hand, her spying would appear to have been on a volunteer basis, for it is hard to imagine anyone less qualified to carry out confidential missions, whether for the Russian Little Father or for the Mahatmas.

A young scholar, eager to do a creditable piece of work on his first major assignment, Hodgson had come to India hoping to find some new discovery, a clue to new powers that would give his report historic importance. His prepossessions, he acknowledged were "distinctly in favor of occultism and Madame Blavatsky." In the end he had to admit that he had not found one genuine phenomenon; it was a "huge fraudulent system worked out by Madame Blavatsky" with the aid of her confederates and dupes. The Report maintained an admirably objective tone, recognizing and appreciating honest co-operation in trying to get at the truth, distinguishing between shades of good faith of the chelas and lay-chelas, exonerating the Colonel from wilful deception while showing "extraordinary credulity and inaccuracy in observation and inference." The Report's judgment on Madame Blavatsky was boiled down into one withering sentence:

We regard her neither as the mouthpiece of hidden seers nor as a mere vulgar adventuress; we think she has achieved a title to permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious and interesting impostors in history.

### 2. FAREWELL TO INDIA

(1885)

It was a belligerent Madame who came back to Adyar on December 21, 1884. Several hundred students from the Madras Missionary College, which had published the Coulomb letters met her at the station, decked her with gar-

## *SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH*

lands, sprinkled her with perfume, and read a flowery address of welcome. A Western woman friendly to Indian nationalism was under attack, and they wanted to show their sympathy, besides which to do so was an easy way to annoy their prunes-and-prisms lady missionaries. H.P.B. was so deeply moved that she got to her feet and stammered out her thanks, the only time that the Colonel heard her even try to speak in public. As usual in moments of emotion, she fell back on the Bible: "Her accusers had sold her out when her back was turned like Judas Iscariot."

Far from chastened, H.P.B. was returning in a tense and triumphant mood. On her way home she had stopped off at Cairo and tracked down the family of M. Coulomb, from whom she had learned some damaging stories about his wife, and she had picked up rumors involving both of them in a fraudulent bankruptcy. She would not only sue the missionaries, but the Coulombs as well. Unfortunately she had less than a week to get ready for the ninth annual gathering of the Theosophical Society, and she had to postpone her plans for revenge until after the convention.

Mechanically H.P.B. went through the routine of a Lady Founder, joining the dignitaries on the pillared verandah for a group photograph, a motley collection of turbans and costumes gathered from all over India. She did not relax, but sat up straight in her big chair, attended by the Cooper-Oakleys and the two white-bearded patriarchs, Colonel Olcott and General Morgan. She looked exhausted; it was almost the only picture in which she forgot to try to conceal the folds of flesh hanging loose about her neck. She might well look tired, for between sessions she was engaged in a war of words that went on and on like the unraveling of a long knitted scarf. The legal talent of the Society, Subba Row and Sir S. Subramania Iyer, were supporting Olcott and ranged against her, for she alone refused to recognize how badly she would fare in any law court. They



## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

were trying to persuade her not to sue for libel because they shuddered at the thought of the Old Lady in the hands of a cross-examiner, contradicting herself, getting excited, making progressively wilder statements until she lost all control and told the lawyers, the court and the entire British government where they could go!

Lashing at her advisers, H.P.B. accused them of cowardice and lack of faith in the Masters; but it was the lack of her faith in herself that she resented. Far into the nights they struggled, H.P.B. with eyes blazing and face livid, cajoling, storming, cursing. The men talked in relays, retiring exhausted to reassure each other that this time they must make a stand and protect the Old Lady from herself. Finally the Colonel secured a compromise under threat that if she did not yield they would all resign and leave her in the wreckage. Sulkily she agreed to abide by the decision of the one hundred delegates, and the question of suing the missionaries and the Coulombs was presented on the floor of the convention, which voted unanimously that "Madame Blavatsky should not prosecute her defamers in a court of law." Olcott had provided his partner with an alibi: she could blame her failure to prosecute on the stupidity of her colleagues. Ironically, most of H.P.B.'s devotees today hold Olcott responsible for her troubles at this time, and refer reproachfully to "the betrayal of H.P.B."

Distraught and resentful, H.P.B. wasted no time in brooding. Before the last of the convention guests had left the compound, Adyar was honored by visits from the Masters on two successive nights. In spite of all the recent publicity, and with Hodgson on the premises, H.P.B. still had confederates available and the courage to use them. A minor member of the hierarchy, Djual Khool, waked Olcott on the night of January 7, 1885, for a confidential chat; on the following night the Master Morya visited H.P.B. and left with her the plan for a new book to be "dictated to her by

## SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

the Masters." During the several years of hard times immediately ahead, she clung to this commission as to a life preserver. In the end the outline was discarded, but she emerged triumphantly with another two volume *opus*, *The Secret Doctrine*.

Although she could not foresee that within three months she would leave India forever, H.P.B. was in a savage mood just when she most needed to be gracious and diplomatic. Olcott escaped on a propaganda trip to Burma, taking with him the latest probationer, Leadbeater, whom he described as "a village curate out on a bust." Olcott's tour had scarcely begun when he was recalled by a cablegram from Damodar: H.P.B. was dying. She had signed another deathbed statement, and the chelas stood about with long faces. At the last moment the Masters intervened and once more saved her life.

The compound had been tense after Olcott left, with H.P.B. sulking on her rooftop and no one to keep things going. The place bristled with petty court cabals and plain backroom politics. Lane-Fox, the gentleman who had lost his temper and struck M. Coulomb, had played up to H.P.B.'s weakness for good manners and the old school tie, and had enjoyed a brief period as favorite. He was shown a letter from the Master Morya that abused Olcott as a bumbling old fool and said some very pleasant things about Lane-Fox. The Master had accredited him as a special envoy to influence the burra sahibs (vernacular for important people—English officials) in favor of Theosophy. It went to Lane-Fox's head: as heir apparent he would breathe new life into the demoralized Society. His first concern was to get rid of Olcott and his vulgar American accent. He teamed up with Dr. Hartmann for the indoctrination of H.P.B. herself. Hartmann had ingratiated himself by writing two pamphlets defending her against the Coulomb charges. The first, labeled "Private and Confidential," un-

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

dertook to justify the most extreme claims for Theosophy; in February a more moderate second pamphlet broke the news that the prosecutions had been dropped.<sup>8</sup>

Lane-Fox was promoting a reorganization of the Adyar management. It would, first, depose Olcott; next, the organization, including the magazine and publishing business, which had netted a profit of five thousand dollars in its first five years under Olcott's management, would be turned over to a committee composed chiefly of Lane-Fox and Hartmann. They made good progress with a whispering campaign against Olcott and for themselves, induced H.P.B. to sign a paper authorizing the plan, and secured a letter of endorsement from the Master Morya. But they worked too fast. After signing the paper on February 5, 1885, H.P.B. went to bed, cabled for Olcott and had Damodar tell everyone she was dying. Her panic had other contributing causes, chiefly the arrival of the English mail with a copy of the last Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research. It outlined the scope of Hodgson's proposed investigation and gave H.P.B. a paralyzing preview of what she might expect.

On the Colonel's return, H.P.B. repudiated the Lane-Fox reorganization plan and put the two aspirants in their places by exhibiting a severe letter from the Master Morya; he certified in pseudo-legalistic language that he had never, as they falsely claimed, accused Olcott of incompetence or approved turning over the management to Mr. Lane-Fox and his committee. Within a week H.P.B. was up and around, and Olcott hurried back to Burma, only to be recalled four weeks later by another cabled summons to H.P.B.'s bedside. She had had to send this message herself, for Damodar was gone. On February 23 he quietly disap-

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Franz Hartmann: *Report of Observations made during a nine-months stay at the Headquarters of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, (Madras, India, September 1884)*. Also, *Report of the Result of an Investigation into the Charges against Madame Blavatsky Brought by Missionaries of the Scottish Free Church at Madras and Examined by Committee Appointed for That Purpose by General Council of The Theosophical Society* (Madras: Scottish Press, February 1885).

## *SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH*

peared, leaving a note to say that he had been summoned by the Masters to Tibet. Theosophists have several versions of the Damodar legend. The orthodox believe that he really did join the Masters in Tibet. The heterodox tell a story of his departing on foot, carrying only a staff, without warm clothing or supplies, and of his body being found frozen to death in the foothills of those high Himalayas which Madame had chosen as the abode of her Mahatmas. The real story is probably less romantic. Under Hodgson's skilful questioning, Damodar had cut a poor figure; trapped into contradictions and falsehoods, he was painfully discredited. H.P.B.'s panic over the investigation had further depressed him; if she, with her supernatural powers, was so frightened, what chance had he at the hands of the relentless English Sahib? Although Damodar was a wild-eyed, neurotic looking lad, he came of a substantial family, and had the quivering, sensitive pride characteristic of high-caste Indians. He had given H.P.B. his complete faith, and now she had nothing to suggest. Perhaps it had been his fault that those astral trips were only pretended; perhaps it was true, as she said, that if his faith had been stronger, they would have been real experiences. Even now, if he took the Mahatmas at their word, put himself literally at their mercy, perhaps they would have pity and carry him away on a last sublime astral journey, away from trouble and care forever and ever. Perhaps it was something like this that happened to Damodar.

The tempo accelerated to a dizzy whirl. On March 11, Hodgson returned to the compound. He had been at work in Bombay, Simla, and Calcutta, searching out witnesses of the phenomena, visiting places where they had occurred. Hume, who had rendered invaluable assistance, returned to Madras with him and called the inner circle into conference on March 13. Although susceptible to the lure of occultism, Hume was a realist and sensed his own embarrassing position when the S. P. R. report appeared. It would not only blast H.P.B.'s reputation, but it would advertise the entire

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

group of Theosophists, past and present, as "muffs and domestic imbeciles" unless they had a thorough housecleaning. And they must have it now, so that Hodgson, who was sailing on March 26, would know about it before writing his report.

The Theosophists also faced internal difficulties. H.P.B.'s failure to sue the missionaries was beginning to appear incriminating, and the branches were writing in to ask questions. The chelas and lay-chelas held long conferences, and for the first time were free to say what they thought: H.P.B. had gone to bed again, and Olcott was still in Burma. Hume had given the press a strong statement repudiating the Coulomb letters on the cynical ground that "Madame Blavatsky is no fool"; he could not believe, he said, that she would give Madame Coulomb "the entire power over her future that the writing of such letters involves." But that was when they had first appeared. After working with Hodgson he was forced to face the magnitude of her fraud. Dominating the conference, he insisted on admitting Hodgson to their deliberations as an evidence of good faith; after all, their motto was: "There is no religion higher than the Truth!"

Hume led the discussion into such plain talk and frank admissions that the wall of mystery behind which the chelas had been crouching blew away like a fog. Most of the Europeans joined in, and once they had begun to talk, all sorts of bottled-up exasperations came bursting out. It was when some of the devoted Indian chelas who perjured themselves to the bitter end insisted that the Shrine had a solid back that Hartmann growled that they knew nothing about it because "nobody was allowed to touch that damned Shrine." The next thing he knew Hartmann had admitted that his propaganda pamphlets were full of false statements and he had given Hodgson a written eye-witness account of the burning of the Shrine. Judge, realizing that the game was up, confessed that it was he who burned the pieces of wood.

It was almost like a revival, and they found emotional re-

## *SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH*

lief in dropping their masks and telling the truth. While they were in the mood, Hume drew up resolutions admitting that most of the phenomena were fraudulent and that the Coulomb letters were written by Madame. He also proposed two official actions:

- to withdraw both of the Hartmann pamphlets as having been written on inadequate information, and
- to reorganize the Theosophical Society and accept the resignations of Madame Blavatsky, Colonel Olcott, Damodar, Babaji, and Bhavani Shankar.\*

Hume was going too far. Dr. Hartmann and the Cooper-Oakleys combined to oppose him on the first two resolutions, which would have undermined the foundations of Theosophical pretensions, and the group refused to go on record as to the authenticity of either the phenomena or the Coulomb letters. However, they accepted Hume's two proposals for official action almost without change. The Hartmann pamphlets were officially withdrawn and disavowed (but Theosophists still base their defense of H.P.B. upon the second pamphlet). The Society was reorganized. H.P.B. resigned temporarily and left India permanently; her confederates were repudiated; only Olcott remained active. It was an overwhelming rebuff for Madame Blavatsky, but worse followed. The missionaries had waited hopefully for her lawsuit. When they realized that the Theosophists' discretion outweighed their valor, they took the initiative and sued General Morgan for libeling Madame Coulomb; he had called her a forger in a fiery statement in defense of H.P.B. The purpose of the suit was to force Madame Blavatsky into court, where they could subject her to cross-examination.

In the midst of this nightmare, new revelations about H.P.B. rose from the past to disconcert the Colonel on his return from Burma. Hodgson showed him early letters written by H.P.B. to Hurrychund and the Arya Samajists while

\* Another confederate.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

she was still in New York. Concerned only to impress these Indians with her importance, H.P.B. had written disparagingly of her partner. Olcott was no more than "a psychologized baby" completely under her thumb; she had such magnetic power that she could make him believe anything merely by looking into his eyes. The Yankees think themselves smart, she continued, and especially this Colonel Olcott, but he would have to get up much earlier in the morning to be as smart as she. It took the Colonel by surprise and he recoiled from the flippant egotism of the woman for whom he had made great sacrifices. This was the darkest hour of his life, and for a day or two he contemplated suicide. "I was almost ready to go to the beach and drown myself in the sea."

There was no time for heartaches, however. Everything was lost for all of them if the missionaries succeeded in dragging H.P.B. into court. She was unable by this time to give any assistance in making plans. Dr. Hartmann's sedatives had worn themselves out, and she could find no relief. Her face flushed purple-red, her beautiful eyes glazed and protruding from their sockets, she tramped the floor by the hour, cursing and muttering. Or she would stand transfixed, looking down from her rooftop into the heart of the compound. Suddenly her little kingdom seemed infinitely desirable. She watched the coming and going of chelas, servants, visitors, under the green casuarina trees; wistfully she savored the pomp and circumstance with which she had surrounded herself.

Downstairs, Olcott and his advisers were in conference day and night. Listlessly, H.P.B. assented to their plans, and they ordered Babula to pack her trunks. Fearing legal action to detain her, Olcott outwitted courts and press by securing her passage to Europe under an assumed name. She was accompanied by Dr. Hartmann, a personal maid-devotee, Mary Flynn, and a neurotic but devoted Hindu chela, known at that time as Babaji. Swathed in invalid wrappings,

### *SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH*

H.P.B. in a hospital chair was wheeled down the long mole; a hoisting tackle swung her aboard the steamer like a dead thing. So ended Madame Blavatsky's career in India. On March 31, 1885, in a state of collapse, hiding under an assumed name, a fugitive from the revenge of her late accomplice, Madame Coulomb, she bade the land of her Mahatmas a last farewell.



## CHAPTER XVI



### *BLOODY BUT UNBOWED*

(1885—6)

IT WAS appropriate that on reaching Europe in April 1885, H.P.B. should make straight for Mount Vesuvius, like herself subject to volcanic eruptions. On board the steamer, safe from the Coulombs and the courts, she had recovered quickly, and long before reaching Naples was back in harness, writing letters, pulling strings, working like a beaver to repair her damaged fortunes.

Dr. Hartmann stayed with her only long enough to see her settled in a modest pension at Torre del Greco. When he left, she was dependent on Olcott's remittances from the magazine for support; maintaining two attendants, Babaji and Mary Flynn, seems elaborate under the circumstances. With no soft words, but making it clear that Olcott's bungling was responsible for all their troubles, she began at once to break the news to him that she would need an increased allowance. Torre del Greco was damp and raw, the Italians did not understand cold weather, they should observe the Russians, the cold damp air blew in perpetually under doors and windows, she would catch her death from sitting with her feet on uncarpeted stone floors. "If you have not sent me away to die, and since there is no money

## BLOODY BUT UNBOWED

for a better apartment or to buy carpets and rugs, please send me the old carpet bought at Bombay . . . to avoid agony and suffering."

She was less sorry for herself in the next letter, written on April 29 to her Russian journalist friend: the view was marvellous, the air healthy and the living "cheaper than stewed turnip." They could all four live here quite as comfortably and much more economically than in Paris. She urged Solovyov to join her at once. She had some very special things to tell him; it would be a magnificent place for him to write, with her to furnish inspiration. She had had to leave India, she explained, because of those abominable Russian spy charges. The British government had no actual evidence against her, but was so frightened by her "enormous influence over the Hindus" that it had officially declared her a spy. Solovyov remained in Paris. Perhaps as a compatriot he was better equipped to resist a Russian woman's blandishments than some of her other associates.

Cut off from Adyar and the magazine into which she had poured her energies, H.P.B. resumed her old habit of writing letters in all directions. Before leaving India she had been planning to recapture Sinnett, and now she tried to reach him through his wife with oblique explanations intended for the Sahib's eyes. For she had been at it again, making up to another medium, a shifty young Frenchman, Gaboriau, whom she commissioned to mystify Sinnett. As usual, the medium had bungled things. It was all a tragic mistake, she wrote. Gaboriau was "a perfect fool," but even so, Sinnett had been unjust and unreasonable. True, she had been forced to conceal certain things from Sinnett but, "I have never deceived him, never tried to mislead him, never lied to him."<sup>1</sup> Surrendering on the Holloway issue, she conceded that Sinnett might establish relations with the Mahatmas in any way agreeable to them. The gesture was a year too late. She had shipped Mrs. Holloway back to

<sup>1</sup> *Letters H.P.B.*, p. 97.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

the States, but she knew that Sinnett was talking directly to the Mahatmas through other mediums and that she could not stop him.

Compared with the arrogance of her halcyon days, this was a different H.P.B. Now and again, in spite of herself, a cry of genuine anguish burst forth. "My heart is broken," she wrote with moving simplicity. Her grief commands the pity due an aging woman struggling against misfortune and against her own temperament. She could not even remain sincere in her grief, but had to embroider it with analogies to the martyrdom of Jesus and appeals to be left to die "like a mangy dog, quietly and alone in my corner." And almost invariably she fell back on her Napoleonic technique of counterattack, laying the blame on the other fellow. The Coulomb charges, "the quasi-ruin of the Society," most of their troubles, were really Sinnett's fault. His greediness for phenomena, his rushing ahead and publishing books to further his own ambitions, and his thrusting them upon a public not prepared to receive them were the root of all their troubles. Sinnett was to blame. Now that she was dying as a result of her efforts on his behalf at Simla, he apparently felt that she could no longer be of service to him, so—"Let him drop me out of his life like a bad penny."

Sinnett glanced back through numerous letters from the Mahatmas urging him to write the books, entrusting all the material to him with "full confidence in your tact and judgment as to what should be printed, and how it should be presented."<sup>2</sup> He smiled grimly at the change of tone, but journalists learn to be patient with the amateur's capricious notions of the sweet uses of publicity.

Madame Blavatsky's most significant move at this time was a short letter to Miss Arundale and her mother. It revealed that the instant India was closed to her she had a plan ready. It was to break with her old partner, the Colonel,

<sup>2</sup> A. P. Sinnett: *Occult World*, p. 104.

## BLOODY BUT UNBOWED

and ruthlessly strip him of power and income as soon as she could find other financial support. *Sauve quit peut.* Olcott had served her purpose and had become an irritation, but she must move cautiously for the Arundales liked the man. The two reserved English women had enjoyed the tall, impressive foreigner who told amusing stories in his atrocious Yankee accent and brought a welcome breeze of masculine vitality into their sheltered home. Madame warned them against Olcott. He had let that Holloway woman wind him around her finger, and was still corresponding with her. Olcott was really responsible for all their troubles, he had made an unfortunate impression on the Psychical Researchers and now, in his monumental vanity, was trying to throw the blame on her. H.P.B.'s verdict was summary: Miss Arundale must help her to disconnect the London Lodge from the parent Theosophical Society and from the Adyar headquarters; she had resolved to cut loose from India and build her own autonomous organization. In justification she cited the antagonism between Indian and European Theosophists.

What, H.P.B. asked, could Adyar offer the Arundales or any other European? Nothing. The Hindu chelas distrusted and hated the Europeans and were determined to prevent their learning any of the secrets of occultism. Even Subba Row was working against her in this matter; Subba Row, the best mind in India, had accused her, as though it were a terrible crime, of revealing the sacred and hidden secrets of occultism to Europeans, and was plotting against her because he feared the Western group would pump more out of her. Skilfully playing Hindus and Europeans against each other, fanning mutual distrust, H.P.B. wove her sea-green web of fantasy. The thing these innocent English gentlefolk wanted most in all the world was to learn these alleged occult secrets. As long as she could convince them that she had something in reserve, tantalizing secrets that

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

they did not know, she was safe. Such was her magic that they still believed that she knew the answer to the Riddle of the Universe.

### 2. EXILE—SAINT HELENA

(1885)

Exile was costing more than sentimental yearnings for Adyar and the chelas. It cut Madame off from her livelihood as editor of *The Theosophist*. When the English press in India accused the Founders of exploiting Theosophy financially, H.P.B. used to reply that the dues of the Society did not pay its expenses and that they were obliged to subsidize it. The joker was that they held the magazine, as their private property, which enabled them to live comfortably, travel, and pay the expenses of the headquarters. It was impractical, however, to try to edit the magazine from Europe. Madame always claimed to be earning generous sums from the Russian press, but the collection of her complete works includes few translations from foreign sources, indicating that such earnings were negligible.<sup>8</sup> She resented dependence upon the Colonel's faithfulness with her monthly allowance of one hundred dollars, and it only added fuel to her rage against her old partner.

After three months on Vesuvius, H.P.B. was ready for a little sightseeing. Accompanied by Babaji and Mary Flynn, she spent a week in Rome and visited Solovyov, who was vacationing at a smart resort in the Alps with an attractive young Parisienne, Madame de Morsier, a leader of the French Theosophists. It was mid-afternoon of August 8, 1885, when H.P.B. reached Saint-Cergues, and the visitors had gathered to await the delivery of the post by the Geneva diligence that brought H.P.B. Solovyov, self-conscious about the impression his guests were making, has left an amusing picture of the scene:

<sup>8</sup> H. P. Blavatsky: *Complete Works*.

## BLOODY BUT UNBOWED

Suddenly there sprang from the diligence a strange creature, something half way between a great ape and a tiny black man [Babaji]. Its leanness was amazing. A poor half European sort of dress half dangled on it, as though there were nothing but bones beneath; a face the size of a fist, of a dark cinnamon color and without any signs of vegetation; on the head a dense cap of long curling black hair; huge eyes also perfectly black, of course, with a frightened and suspicious expression. The black man said something in English with a piping but at the same time hoarse voice.

After him emerged a clumsy young person with a red, disconcerted and not particularly intelligent face [Mary Flynn]. The public gazed open-mouthed at the black man. But the most interesting was yet to come. The black man and the clumsy young woman and then I and Madame de Morsier succeeded with great difficulty in extracting from the diligence something that was shut up in it. This something was Madame herself, all swollen, tired out with travelling, grumbling; with a huge dark grey face, and wide open eyes like two round, discolored tourquoises. On her head was set a very high grey felt firemen's helmet with ventilators and a veil. Her globular figure seemed yet more globular from an incredible sort of sacque in which she was draped.

Inevitably, H.P.B. was not pleased with her accommodations. The *pension* had reserved three rooms, but they were not adjoining as requested. Babaji and Mary Flynn could do nothing to divert her rage and stood helpless before her with tears in their eyes. Turning to the embarrassed Madame de Morsier and Solovyov, H.P.B. appealed for sympathy:

There my friends, now you see my position yourselves. Some days I can move neither hand nor foot and lie like a log, and no one to help me to anything. Bavaji only spins like a top, and this Mashka Flynn is a born fool, and I curse the day when I agreed to take her with me. You see the fact is, she was dreadfully bored at home and thought that she could find some agreeable distractions in travelling; and can you imagine, as soon as a man shows his face she is all over ribbons, she rolls her eyes and generally behaves in the most unbecoming way, though she is a Buddhist. Why she took to Buddhism, I cannot conceive. And yet, though

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

she is a fool"—Madame suddenly recollected herself—"yet just ask her, she sees the Master almost everyday when he appears to her. Mary, come here.

Mashka ran up panting, with a frightened expression on her red face,

"Tell the truth, do you see the Master?"

"Oh yes, yes, I see him."

"There now, you see! Why should she lie? And she is such a fool that she could not even make up a lie; she does see and there is an end of it. Now go and disprove her, or say that she has hallucinations every day! And yet, according to the psychical gentlemen, I invented the Mahatmas myself! <sup>4</sup>

Forgetting Mary Flynn and Babaji, H.P.B. launched into such a violent tirade against the Coulombs and missionaries that it was almost necessary to restrain her by force. In the midst of the invective, her mood shifted, her face and voice changed, and she soared into other spheres. In an instant she had become a prophetess, inspired, transfigured, expressing her thoughts with the simple felicity of a mystic who has experienced revelations not vouchsafed to ordinary mortals.

At Würzburg, H.P.B. was joined in December 1885 by the Countess Wachtmeister, her only intimate woman disciple before Annie Besant. Approaching sixty, H.P.B. was in failing health, and little as she liked her own sex, she appreciated the usefulness of a devoted woman who could sleep in the same room and take constant care of her. If the woman had private means, so much the better. Some day the Colonel might forget or run out of funds. The neophytes seemed to thrive on neglect, and one wonders whether it was part of their training or whether H.P.B. was just being herself. The Countess Wachtmeister's experience, as she recounted it, was typical. All her life the Countess had experienced the tantalizing intuitions of the semi-mystical: she was clairvoyant and clairaudient. On reaching the no-man's-land of middle age, however, she had to give

<sup>4</sup> Solovyoff: *M.P.I.*, pp. 135-6.

## BLOODY BUT UNBOWED

up holding séances because, when in a trance, she was unable to censor the ribald messages that came through from her "controls." Her photographs suggest a torpid woman with heavy-lidded eyes and a dumpy figure. She was excessively shy, but not torpid. On the contrary, she showed herself alert and resourceful, and when occasion arose to protect her beloved guru, she could be as brave as a lion.

The Countess had met H.P.B. in May 1884, at a party at the Sinnetts'. At first she was repelled by the atmosphere of fawning flattery: wherever H.P.B. appeared, the floor at her feet was packed with adorers, and the Countess flinched at the suspicion that H.P.B. encouraged this sticky adulation. Her mounting infatuation swept away her doubts, but she could not bring herself to join the mob, and at a second party contented herself with talking to Olcott and watching H.P.B. from a distance. She would have been surprised to know that H.P.B. was also watching her. Even in London drawing rooms, titled and unattached widows with private means are not too common.

A fortnight later, setting out for Sweden, the Countess received a telegram from H.P.B. in Paris asking her to come over for a private talk. Disregarding warnings against this Russian adventuress, she hurried across the Channel only to find that Madame and her retinue were visiting at the country estate of the Countess d'Adhemar. Countess Wachtmeister meekly trailed after her, but when she sent in her card at the castle, was informed that Madame was occupied. She sent word back that, having come by request, she would wait until Madame was ready to see her. This proved to be the correct play, for she was at once ushered through a crowded salon and briefly introduced to Madame.

The Countess joined Madame's court, seeing her only at table and in the evening, surrounded by lion-hunters ten and twenty deep. She was waiting for a summons to her private interview, and trustfully assumed that she was being tested. Fortunately for her illusions, she never found out



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

that H.P.B. was locked in her room wrestling with a very difficult letter: she was framing her ill-fated reply to Massey's charges of complicity in the Ski fraud. Several days passed and Countess Wachtmeister, embarrassed at accepting further hospitality from the Countess d'Adhemar, sent word that she was leaving the next day. She was at once summoned to Madame's room. Sweeping Massey and her other problems out of her mind, H.P.B. concentrated her charm and understanding upon this shy and lonely woman. The Countess was dazed by H.P.B.'s ability to read her thoughts, by her intimate knowledge of her past life and of her problems. Confidently, H.P.B. prophesied that within two years the Countess would abandon all other interests and devote her life to Theosophy. The Countess protested that it was impossible: she had a son, family ties, landed interests in Sweden. But H.P.B. smiled her sphinx-like smile, looked her through and through with dazzling eyes, "shining with a serene light which seemed to penetrate and unveil the secrets of my heart," and, after an impressive pause, told her: "Master says so, and therefore I know it to be true."

After the death of H.P.B. the Countess wrote a clear, straightforward book of recollections.<sup>5</sup> It was loyally expurgated and gave no hint of the doors that constantly popped open to reveal dangling skeletons. In what she did say, the Countess gave the impression of being truthful, and her memoir is one of the most credible sources of information about H.P.B. It is a fascinating firsthand account of how to win friends and build a cult, but has little value for prospective cult leaders. For who, by taking thought, may hope to imitate the subtle magnetism inherent in Madame's magic? It was fleeting and intangible as the fragrance of the spring evenings of youth.

The Countess, travelling back to Sweden, found herself unable to sleep, and as the wheels of the *wagon-lit* pounded

Countess Constance Wachtmeister: *Reminiscences of H. P. Blavatsky*.

## BLOODY BUT UNBOWED

out their syncopated monotone she pondered whether she could overturn the barriers that hedged her in. Madame's uncanny power of suggestion was at work. Within two years the prophecy came true: the Countess sold her beloved estate overlooking the sea and readjusted her family affairs in order to be free to devote herself to Madame. Vainly her friends protested that the Russian woman was making a fool of her. It was too late; H.P.B. had cast her spell, and the Countess was beyond their reach.

En route to spend the winter of 1885-6 in Italy, the Countess received a telegram: "Come to Würzburg at once. Wanted immediately. H.P.B." Canceling all arrangements, she set off on a visit that was to last four years, until she was supplanted by new disciples. She found Madame established in two spacious rooms on the select Ludwigstrasse. H.P.B. apologized for having no guestroom; she had feared the Countess might be a fine lady who would object to sharing her bedroom. But the Master had told her it would be all right. So she bought a screen to serve as a partition and sent the telegram.

The Master was right. Countess Wachtmeister was happy to share H.P.B.'s bedroom, liked Würzburg, was pleased with everything except Babaji, whom she described as a nervous, dwarfish creature with bright beady eyes, a shrill voice and sly manner, always in the way. She quietly disposed of him by inducing her friend Frau Gebhard to invite him to the big house at Elberfeld for the winter. The Würzburg ménage presented picturesque possibilities: a Countess and a lady with a lurid past and psychic present holding daily persiflage with the demigods. In reality, they were disappointing: two elderly, homely women in a provincial town, tied down to the solitary confinement of grinding out a book—for H.P.B. was at work on *Secret Doctrine*, and the Countess was making a fair copy by hand. Life soon fell into a routine built around the book.

Louise, the maid, brought them six o'clock coffee in bed.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

By seven, H.P.B. was at her desk. After a stop for eight o'clock breakfast, she worked until one o'clock dinner. No one dared interrupt her: at meal times the Countess gently rang a bell outside her door. Sometimes she came at once, sometimes not for an hour or so, to the despair of Louise, who had to cook a fresh dinner unless the Countess took pity and sent her over to the hotel to bring Madame's dinner in on a tray. In the afternoon, back to work until six or seven, when tea was served. After that, H.P.B. relaxed, sitting back in the big armchair that Herr Gebhard had thoughtfully provided, laying out endless games of patience, toting up the score with a bit of chalk on the baize-covered top of her card table while the Countess read aloud from the spiritualist press and current magazines.

The Countess was shocked by H.P.B.'s physical indolence and tried to induce her to go driving, but in their first half-year got her out of the house only three times. The doctor, calling once a week to check on H.P.B., brought them bits of gossip; sometimes the landlord stopped by with an amusing story. Otherwise they were alone; alone not only in Würzburg, but almost alone in the whole, wide world.

The process of writing *Secret Doctrine* was suffused with mystery. One day early in 1886, the Countess, summoned by H.P.B., found the study floor strewn with half-written sheets of paper. H.P.B. petulantly explained that she had tried twelve times to write a certain page, but each time the Master had ordered her to do it over. An hour later she triumphantly called to the Countess that she had finally satisfied her exigent taskmaster. Leaning back, sipping a cup of coffee and smoking, she described how she worked. She emptied her mind, made a mental vacuum. As she looked into it, scene after scene passed before her like the successive pictures of a diorama. If she wanted to quote from a book, she need not visit a library; the astral counterpart of the required page appeared before her and she had only to copy down the words. H.P.B.'s imagination had leaped

## *BLOODY BUT UNBOWED*

ahead half a century and anticipated the modern microfilm and moving picture. At night the Masters provided even more direct aid, for in the morning the Countess would notice on the desk sheets of paper covered with unfamiliar characters in red and blue pencil. These were "precipitated messages" left by the Masters during the night, outlining the day's work for H.P.B.

The monotonous routine was pleasantly interrupted now and again by baffling incidents that added spice to life. H.P.B. now had no confederates to assist her, but she managed very well. At breakfast, while the Countess was buried in the morning paper, a letter she had just read, lying beside her place, would vanish to reappear hours or days later bearing a red-penciled message from the Master. Even the prosaic daily constitutional was touched with trailing clouds of mystery, as when on unwrapping a cake of soap, bought that afternoon from the village chemist, she found a message from the Master tucked inside the wrapper. A cuckoo clock on H.P.B.'s wall behaved in eccentric fashion, bells rang, candles and lamps flickered—slight variations of the bag of tricks that had mystified Tiflis and Rugodevo, only now instead of spirit controls it was the Masters who were responsible.

At night the Countess lying awake and brooding over her charge heard raps every ten minutes all night long, whether H.P.B. was asleep or awake. H.P.B. explained that it was a psychic telegraph communicating with her Master in Tibet, permitting the Master's chelas to keep watch over her body while she in astral form was absent, roaming the Universe. In an emergency one night the Countess waked H.P.B., who responded only after some delay with an agonized cry: "My heart, my heart, Countess, you have nearly killed me." The Countess flew to her bedside. "I was with Master," gasped H.P.B., "why did you call me back?" Frightened and remorseful, the Countess found H.P.B.'s heart palpitating wildly, dosed her with digitalis, nursed her back to normal.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

Never again did the chastened Countess presume to disturb H.P.B.'s sleep.

Lucky Countess! She had the gift of faith. She could give her complete trust to this whimsical guru, whose abracadabra transmuted life's dull monotony into glittering enchantment.

Shielded from harsh reality by the solicitude of the Countess, H.P.B. still managed to involve herself in vexations of spirit. Her chela Mohini, who had once refused to shake hands with contaminated Westerners, was now involved in a scandal with some English girls in Paris. Madame Blavatsky was a woman of the world. Brought up under sophisticated standards, she had as a young woman permitted herself the utmost license. After reaching India, she changed sides and imposed a rigid asceticism upon her chelas. It is anyone's privilege to eschew the lusts of the flesh, but Madame waited until she was nearly fifty, and even then she never pretended to give up such indulgences as meat and chain-smoking.

In the case of Mohini, she lost her head and behaved like a narrow-minded provincial. She also lost her temper and wrote indiscreet letters, blaming the young women with allusions and epithets that covered the entire range of the Old Testament and the classics (Mrs. Potiphar, Messalina, the lupanars of Rome and Pompeii) right on down to modern argot. (See Appendix K, page 332.) Mohini showed the letters to Miss L., one of the Messalinas. Unfortunately for Madame, Messalina had received more than one hundred letters from Mohini. Their tone indicated that it had not been necessary, as Madame assumed, for Messalina to take the initiative. Miss L. handed Madame's letters—and Mohini's—over to her lawyer with instructions to sue for libel. Madame went into a terrific pother. Could they extradite for libel? Would Germany have to give her up? Would they put her in jail? What could she do? In her panic she turned back to Sinnett, dispatching the Countess to London to

## *BLOODY BUT UNBOWED*

beseech him to rescue her once more. After several months a settlement was reached out of court.

By that time however, Madame was genuinely alarmed about Babaji. This neurotic little creature, who stammered when he was praised and sobbed noisily when scolded, had been picked up by blind chance from India's anonymous millions and cast for a heavier part than he could play. In defiance of every British Empire convention, Babaji had been admitted overnight to the confidence and brainstorm of a strange woman who dazzled her own kind and who blinded and terrorized this ignorant lad. H.P.B. told a strange story of Babaji's having escaped from a deep jungle where he was chela to a yogi of the Hatha Yoga school, a form of occult practice that may lead to grave excesses. Wherever he came from, H.P.B. recognized beneath his repulsive appearance a nervous type easy to dominate. She used him in several complicated masquerades, and he adopted half a dozen aliases to cover his tracks and increase the confusion. He once traveled the length of India in fancy dress posing as a chela of the Master K. H. entrusted with a secret mission and ordered to stop off en route to Tibet to convey to Sinnett Sahib the greetings of his Master. The Sahib had been vastly flattered and uplifted.

Inevitably Babaji must have laughed in his sleeve at the gullibility of the proud Sahibs; his secret understanding admitted him to a status actually superior to his white lords and masters. The free and easy manners of the western Theosophists dislocated his standards. He was received by the Gebhards with open arms; their big family provided a too flattering audience for his Tamil and yoga stories. Madame had coached him to play up the Hindu jealousy theme, his resentment of sharing the secrets of occultism with Europeans, and his fear lest H.P.B. betray some of the sacred mysteries confided to her alone of the Western world. This byplay was a last straw.

While everyone was whispering about the Mohini scan-

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

dal, one day in early December 1885, Babaji ran amuck, foaming at the mouth, smashing mirrors and furniture in epileptic seizures, and screaming accusations against Madame: she had desecrated the Masters and the mysteries by sharing them with impure Europeans. He wrote threatening letters to Madame, and she dispatched the Countess to Elberfeld. After years of festering resentment, taking H.P.B.'s abuse, accepting the blame when things went wrong, Babaji was now making a thorough job. He accused her of every form of deceit and treachery, charged that her phenomena were all shams and that she used trickery or else "psychologized" her followers to make them think that they were seeing things. In his raving, he showed an almost insane hatred of H.P.B.: he would draw her life's blood out of her, he would kick her out and destroy the Society, he would tear her to pieces, he would—write articles against her in the London newspapers! <sup>6</sup>

It went beyond mere raving. Babaji had intercepted some damaging letters; he now charged that the Founders used Theosophy and fraudulent Mahatma messages to extort money from Indian rajahs, and he specifically named their friend, Prince Harisinghi. Even the stouthearted Countess was shaken. Her comments testify to her own good faith and illustrate the effectiveness of Madame's methods with a conscientious person. She wrote Sinnett on January 28, 1886:

Though I have often shut my eyes to little irregularities, or at least what seemed to me as such, I have reconciled it to my conscience by thinking that as I understood so little about the Occult laws, I must not judge by appearances, and that perhaps someday I should understand the real meaning; but Babajee's charge is quite different; it is a criminal charge and can be punished by law.

Absolving Madame of blame, the Countess tried to prevent her even hearing of this last scandal, but she turned on

<sup>6</sup> *Letters H.P.B.*, p. 279.

### *BLOODY BUT UNBOWED*

Olcott and, in a very stiff letter, told him "that his and Mme B's word go for nothing in such a case—he must send me a paper exonerating them entirely from this base charge, signed by the Prince and several other people." If such a letter were not forthcoming, she would be obliged to resign, "for I cannot remain in a society where the Founders lie under the imputation of criminal fraud. I must see my way clearly and honestly before me and not blush to be called a Theosophist." Olcott's rajahs wrote the required exonerations, and the Countess, who was good at diplomacy, pacified Babaji and helped to pack him off to India.

Madame Blavatsky had been given a terrifying glimpse of the dangers of the black arts. Her Indian interlude had turned to ashes, and unhappy memories, and she wrote harsh and bitter things to her old friends in India. She had not many left; her Hindu protégés were all deserting her: Mohini was building his own career; Damodar's alleged trip to Tibet was probably suicide; Babaji had become a Frankenstein. She found consolation in her exile from India. Perhaps Europeans were safer.



## CHAPTER XVII



### *HELENA UNVEILED*

(1886)

FOR twelve years Madame had been creating a mythical character: H P.B., the Sinister Saint. Against the olive green background of an abnormal childhood she had sketched her heroine, a Christian saint with decadent overtones; deleting the Christianity, she had retained the mystical trend, the visions, the miracles and a concern for the redemption of the world. In spite of fumbling, her magnetism and her flair for publicity had carried her far.

Nemesis caught up with her in the form of the Psychical Research report. Although forewarned of what to expect, H.P.B. took it to heart when she saw in cold print the words branding her an impostor, and as always she turned to Sinnett, who urged that her only hope was to let him write her biography. It was her sole chance to let the public know and appreciate the real H.P.B. Sinnett had long advised such a book and been vetoed by Madame, who knew the impossibility of accounting for twenty-five vagabond years. Now in desperation she agreed.

Madame's off-the-record letters to Sinnett, written early in 1886 and published many years later (p. 42), offer a sparkling contrast to Sinnett's antiseptic little memoir,

## HELENA UNVEILED

which ignored such important characters as Metrovitch, Baron Meyendorf, and the infant Youry. It was not Sinnett's fault that the book was so dull. He pled for more realistic material, but he had to take what he could get: memories of H.P.B.'s childhood and youth, prepared by her sister and aunt under her direction and glistening with the slick unreality of propaganda.

Although Sinnett could not get what he wanted, he refused knowingly to accept fictitious documents, and he omitted two exhibits that H.P.B. took some trouble to prepare. Early in 1886 the Countess had been unpacking a box of odds and ends belonging to H.P.B. that her aunt, Madame Fadeev, had happened to forward at just this time. Opening a sketchbook, H.P.B. ecstatically pointed to a picture of drifting boats that she had drawn when visiting London with her father in 1851 (p. 27). She told the Countess of meeting a tall Hindu in Hyde Park at that time; it was her Master Morya who, in astral form, had watched over her since childhood and had several times saved her life. He now told her that she had been selected to found the Theosophical Society, that she must take three years training (reduced from seven) in Tibet, and he had warned her of the persecution and martyrdom that lay before her. H.P.B. read aloud the lines beneath the drawing:

Nuit memorable! Certaine nuit au clair de lune qui se couchait à Ramsgate, 12 Aout,\* 1851, lorsque je rencontrais M. le maître de mes rêves!! [Unforgettable night! The very night when I met M' the Master of my dreams by the light of the setting moon at Ramsgate on August 12,\* 1851!!]<sup>1</sup>

It was another effort to document H.P.B.'s lifelong association with the Masters. Sinnett expressed his opinion by ignoring it, but Annie Besant and the Countess put it in circulation. The story is now part of the Theosophists'

\* [H.P.B.'s footnote] August 12 is July 31 on the Russian calendar, My birthday. Twenty years!

<sup>1</sup> Countess Wachtmeister: *Reminiscences*, p. 56.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

myth, related with reverent emotion, their version of the Annunciation when the young Helena dedicated her life to the Mahatmas.

Another apocryphal document scrambled together for the biography was a curious affidavit that H.P.B. labeled a certificate of virginity. It was something quite different. It was a statement that she had never borne a child, signed by the misspelled name of a Würzburg physician, Dr. Leon Oppenheim [his name was really Oppenheimer]. To make the paper more impressive, Madame added the signatures of her most prominent German Theosophists, President Hübbe-Schleiden and Herr Gebhard, who testified that the translation of the letter into English was accurate. Sinnett failed to use this document, and its only significance, in view of Madame's facility with pen and ink, is to indicate the overpowering sense of guilt that dogged her through life. She never came to terms with her past, was never able to view it from the hilltop of the years and say, "Too bad, but there it is, my life, and good or bad, it made me what I am."

Sinnett's labors on the biography were interrupted by several typhoons, as when H.P.B. received a letter from the lawyers representing Miss L., addressed to:

"MME. METROVITCH OTHERWISE  
MAD. BLAVATSKY."

With regard to her own past, Madame believed in letting sleeping dogs lie. In a panic lest this memoir revive forgotten memories, provide further ammunition to her enemies, she wanted to abandon it, but was reconciled to it by Sinnett and the Countess. A year later, with the book almost finished, she again nearly canceled the project. Solovyov had visited her in Würzburg, and she, very much attracted, had tried to lure him into a partnership. She was looking for a successor to Olcott and Sinnett, and he had every qualification: he was an experienced and successful

## HELENA UNVEILED

writer interested in psychic phenomena. Best of all, he was a Russian.

At first Solovyov had seemed docile and suggestible; then things began to go wrong. The little silver bell that made the astral music dropped to the floor one day from inside her dress. Solovyov stooped to pick it up and—"Helena Petrovna changed countenance and snatched the object from me." Asked to hand her some papers, he happened on a package of Chinese envelopes, the kind used by the Mahatmas, and he chided her carelessness with a mischievous twinkle. He taxed her with her impostures so cynically that she was misled into thinking he condoned them and asked him to collaborate with her. "If you will come to my aid, we will astonish the world between us and we shall have everything in our hands."<sup>2</sup> But she misjudged her man.

Solovyov returned to Russia to a flirtation with sister Vera. Under the indiscreet influence of their romance, Vera told Solovyov the inside story of her sister's past. This was one of the worst blows Helena had to suffer. No more poignant torture could have been devised than to have her younger sister walk off with a man she wanted. Well aware that love's young dream was over for her, she could still be jealous. She needed Solovyov's skill and experience—and he attracted her. When she learned of her sister's affair from her aunt, she turned on Solovyov, spreading ugly stories about the women of his family. He warned her to leave them alone, reminding her that he knew that her first husband was still alive, "old Blavatsky whom you have prematurely buried."

Worried about her bigamies and her sister's betrayal, H.P.B. wrote to Sinnett countermanding the memoir, though it was nearly finished. Fearful that he might give it to the publisher in spite of her, the Old Lady, who had ruled her chelas so tyrannically was, for once, brought to her knees. "Imagine the result of publishing this book if I am

<sup>2</sup> Solovyoff: *M P.I.*, p. 154.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

not a widow—Tableau—and you will lose your reputation along with me. *Please put the book by.*”

After her death, Solovyov too wrote a book about Helena Petrovna.<sup>3</sup> It was far from unbiased; resentment of her attacks upon his family had not had time to cool. But H.P.B.’s letters to Aksakov, which he published, are unquestioned and the book, written in an easy, informal style, furnished a complementary picture to Hodgson’s scholarly report. It was translated and published in England under the sponsorship of the Society for Psychical Research. Henry Sidgwick, the philosopher from Cambridge University, wrote the introduction and commended Solovyov’s vivid description of Madame, “her supple craft and reckless audacity, her intellectual vigour and elastic vitality, her genuine *bonhomie*, affectionateness and (on occasion) persuasive pathos.”

From a political point of view, the most serious accusation in Solovyov’s book was the corroboration by a compatriot that Madame was at least a potential Russian spy. He asserted that she asked his patriotic assistance in securing for her a position “as a secret agent of the Russian government in India. To promote the triumph of my country over those vile English I am capable of anything. I hate the English government in India with its missionaries; they are all my personal enemies, thirsting for my destruction.”

And in this book Solovyov described Madame’s desperate gesture when she realized that he refused to collaborate. In February 1886 she wrote the most indiscreet letter in a life notable for lack of discretion, and she wrote it to Solovyov, the man she had been libeling and vilifying, the man who had jilted her for her younger sister. Abrupt, defiant, it showed an undisciplined woman battering her head against a stone wall. Aware that Vera had told him all, she dropped her pretense and let herself go in an outburst pulsating with passion. She labelled it *My Confession*. (See Appendix L, page 334.)

<sup>3</sup> *A Modern Priestess of Isis.*

## HELENA UNVEILED

H.P.B. began with an allegory of a wild boar, an ugly, peaceful creature who turned upon a pack of ferocious hounds and destroyed them until he too fell dead. She would show herself as she really was at last, and the hounds—Solovyov, Home, Baron Meyendorf—could no longer frighten her with their threats. She would confess everything, it would be “a saturnalia of the moral depravity of mankind, this confession of mine, a worthy epilogue for my stormy life. And it will be a treasure for science as well as for scandal; and it is all *me, me.*” In the confession, false and true were inextricably confused. She admitted that: she had abandoned her husband in 1848, being still a virgin; she did not care a straw about M[eyendorf], an egotist and hypocrite who lied about her to Home; she had loved one man deeply and wandered with him in Asia, America, and Europe; there was a story about a child, but it was not hers; she had been accused of various depravities; she had deliberately “tried to get people to talk about her” and to accuse her of having lovers, hundreds of them, from her eighteenth year on; she had fooled dozens of people and would expose them—fools and *halucinées*; she had invented the Mahatmas, and the phenomena were mere spiritualistic apparitions—but this, she added, would be a lie. She still denied that the child was hers, still tried to ridicule the scandalmongers with her declaration of hundreds of lovers. She would tell a great deal more, she added “of which no one ever dreamed.” But she could not bring herself to repudiate the Mahatmas; she wrote the words down and took them back. Her lovers belonged to the past, far away and long ago; the Mahatmas had taken their place and she could not betray them. Instead, she tried once more to authenticate her revelation: suddenly her eyes had been opened to “all the horror of my moral suicide”; she had been sent to America to expiate her faults, to attempt to make men better and to sacrifice herself for their regeneration. She prayed God to permit her to die immediately on

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

not a widow—Tableau—and you will lose your reputation along with me. *Please put the book by.*”

After her death, Solovyov too wrote a book about Helena Petrovna.<sup>8</sup> It was far from unbiased; resentment of her attacks upon his family had not had time to cool. But H.P.B.’s letters to Aksakov, which he published, are unquestioned and the book, written in an easy, informal style, furnished a complementary picture to Hodgson’s scholarly report. It was translated and published in England under the sponsorship of the Society for Psychical Research. Henry Sidgwick, the philosopher from Cambridge University, wrote the introduction and commended Solovyov’s vivid description of Madame, “her supple craft and reckless audacity, her intellectual vigour and elastic vitality, her genuine *bonhomie*, affectionateness and (on occasion) persuasive pathos.”

From a political point of view, the most serious accusation in Solovyov’s book was the corroboration by a compatriot that Madame was at least a potential Russian spy. He asserted that she asked his patriotic assistance in securing for her a position “as a secret agent of the Russian government in India. To promote the triumph of my country over those vile English I am capable of anything. I hate the English government in India with its missionaries; they are all my personal enemies, thirsting for my destruction.”

And in this book Solovyov described Madame’s desperate gesture when she realized that he refused to collaborate. In February 1886 she wrote the most indiscreet letter in a life notable for lack of discretion, and she wrote it to Solovyov, the man she had been libeling and vilifying, the man who had jilted her for her younger sister. Abrupt, defiant, it showed an undisciplined woman battering her head against a stone wall. Aware that Vera had told him all, she dropped her pretense and let herself go in an outburst pulsating with passion. She labelled it *My Confession*. (See Appendix L, page 334.)

<sup>8</sup> *A Modern Priestess of Isis.*

## HELENA UNVEILED

H.P.B. began with an allegory of a wild boar, an ugly, peaceful creature who turned upon a pack of ferocious hounds and destroyed them until he too fell dead. She would show herself as she really was at last, and the hounds—Solovyov, Home, Baron Meyendorf—could no longer frighten her with their threats. She would confess everything, it would be “a saturnalia of the moral depravity of mankind, this confession of mine, a worthy epilogue for my stormy life. And it will be a treasure for science as well as for scandal; and it is all *me, me*.” In the confession, false and true were inextricably confused. She admitted that: she had abandoned her husband in 1848, being still a virgin; she did not care a straw about M[eyendorf], an egotist and hypocrite who lied about her to Home; she had loved one man deeply and wandered with him in Asia, America, and Europe; there was a story about a child, but it was not hers; she had been accused of various depravities; she had deliberately “tried to get people to talk about her” and to accuse her of having lovers, hundreds of them, from her eighteenth year on; she had fooled dozens of people and would expose them—fools and *halucinées*; she had invented the Mahatmas, and the phenomena were mere spiritualistic apparitions—but this, she added, would be a lie. She still denied that the child was hers, still tried to ridicule the scandalmongers with her declaration of hundreds of lovers. She would tell a great deal more, she added “of which no one ever dreamed.” But she could not bring herself to repudiate the Mahatmas; she wrote the words down and took them back. Her lovers belonged to the past, far away and long ago; the Mahatmas had taken their place and she could not betray them. Instead, she tried once more to authenticate her revelation: suddenly her eyes had been opened to “all the horror of my moral suicide”; she had been sent to America to expiate her faults, to attempt to make men better and to sacrifice herself for their regeneration. She prayed God to permit her to die immediately on



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

publication of this confession and added in a defiant postscript:

*You may print this letter if you will, even in Russia. It is all the same now.*

It was the emotional equivalent of a suicide note. Solovyov and her sister, Russians, her own people, had the power to hurt her more than anyone else in the world, and they had used it. She craved revenge, and yet how could she hurt them? She had neither power nor money; she dared not even slander Solovyov because of his threats. She could humiliate them by humiliating herself. It was all that was left. In a frenzy she ripped off the mask and dared Solovyov to show the world what lay concealed.

### 2. SLIPPING

(1886)

A trivial circumstance drove H.P.B. away from Würzburg in May 1886. Indian friends of the professor of Sanskrit at the University were sending him the current bazaar gossip about Madame. She never went out, and saw few people, but Würzburg suddenly became intolerable. Although the rent was paid for a month and a half in advance, they must leave at once. The Countess, who was neglecting her own affairs and had several times postponed an urgent trip to Sweden, appealed to Sinnett for help. It was not safe, she explained, to leave H.P.B. alone during these stormy times because she could not resist writing insulting and provocative letters that only stirred up fresh disaster. Badly as things had gone during the past winter, they might have been worse: "She has written much that I would have given anything to throw behind the fire—I have saved her again and again from these indiscretions."

Madame's American chela, William Q. Judge, always regretted his failure to accept her invitation to come and stay with her at this time; she even offered to pay all his expenses

## HELENA UNVEILED

—with the Countess's money. But Judge had disposed of his wife and family responsibilities once, when he moved to India in 1884; now, having been sent back to the States, he did not propose to tear up his roots again. Similarly the Indian chela Mohini, busy with his own career, found it impossible to help, to the bitter indignation of the Countess, who wrote Sinnett with unusual asperity that if Mohini was the stuff of which chelas were made, she hoped that no more specimens would be sent to Europe. Sinnett would gladly have taken a cottage at a coast resort where Mrs. Sinnett could stay with H.P.B., but with the libel suit pending they dared not bring Madame to England. They discussed her coming secretly under an assumed name, but abandoned the plan, fearing that H.P.B. would slip through their fingers and rush into fresh indiscretions.

Desperately the Countess appealed to Sinnett; among all the Theosophists in London there must be some one lady (meaning Mrs. Sinnett perhaps?) willing to spend a few weeks with H.P.B. in Würzburg, free of expense, someone they could trust not to worm her way into H.P.B.'s confidence and then betray her to all the world! This spring of 1886 saw Madame's fortunes at their lowest ebb. The courage and the financial support of the Countess pulled her through. She was still to make an extraordinary comeback in time to leave this world in a blaze of glory. But she had to recruit a new set of disciples. The episodes of the past two years had cost her all the most able and alert of her followers. Resignations had come in thick and fast. The London Lodge was only a shadow; Miss Francesca Arundale crossed to the Continent in order to tell H.P.B. in person that she and her closest friends were resigning. The French section was moribund. After it had been split into factions by the unfortunate episode with the medium, Gaboriau, its process of demoralization was completed by the stories of H.P.B.'s lurid youth that had come via Solovyov and Madame de Morsier. The German Society

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

was also unhappy; the president, Herr Professor Hübbschleiden, could not stand the heckling of his colleagues; Dr. Hartmann who pretended to be a warm friend was sniping behind H.P.B.'s back. Even the Gebhards were wondering: some of the phenomena during H.P.B.'s last visit had been very crude.

The months passed, and not one soul appeared willing to stay with the Old Lady for a few weeks. Resolutely the Countess stuck to her post, even sacrificing her obligation to reach Sweden in time for her son's twenty-first birthday festivities. As a last resort she patched up a truce with H.P.B.'s aunt and sister Vera. They would meet her in Ostend, find her an apartment, and get her settled. Although the Countess regarded Madame with utmost reverence, she was not blind to her unconscious humor. An old friend, Miss Kislingbury, came over from London to escort Madame and her maid Louise from Wurzburg to Ostend. The Countess bundled the party off early on the morning of May 8, 1886, and bribed a guard to let H.P.B. have a carriage to herself. Such a thing was unheard of, impossible, but money does wonders, and the guard unlocked a carriage door in the center of the long train. H.P.B., who had not been out of her room for weeks, was exhausted by the walk down the platform, and it required the assistance of the entire party to get her wedged through the carriage door, followed by her nine pieces of luggage, pillows, coverlets, handbags, boxes, and the precious chest containing the pages of the *Secret Doctrine*.

Just as they had H.P.B. comfortably settled, an Olympian higher official, attracted by the turmoil, appeared in the doorway and sternly forbade using this passenger carriage as a baggage car. It was *verboten*: the luggage must be checked in the compartment provided for the purpose. The Tyrant declaimed in German, H.P.B. spluttered French, Miss Kislingbury apologized in English. The Countess and Louise watched anxiously from the side lines. What stern

## HELENA UNVEILED

decision the Tyrant might have enforced will never be known; providentially a whistle blew and the train glided out of the shed leaving him stranded on a pinnacle of frustrated emotion. The Countess gazed down the V of shining rails at the vanishing train with mingled relief and guilt. She had a pitying sense of the customs barriers to be passed, the complex ordeals of unloading and reloading Madame, the peremptory officials to be soothed. Her heart ached for Miss Kislingbury.

Breaking her journey at Cologne, H.P.B. was met by Herr Gebhard, who carried her off to Elberfeld for a day or two. On her arrival in their comfortable home, H.P.B. immediately slipped on the parquet floor and took to her bed for several weeks where she was petted and waited on by all the family. August 1886 found her in Ostend, established in the most pretentious quarters since Adyar. She described the grandeur with childlike satisfaction in a letter to the Countess, a suite of three rooms for herself with satin hangings in the archways and a piano in her private drawing-room; across the hall, two rooms for the Countess. The apartment cost more than she could afford, she admitted coyly, but she thought the Countess would like it. Soon they had settled back into a routine similar to that of the previous winter in Wurzburg, but with a difference. A change was coming over H.P.B. Her recent succession of emotional ordeals had left scars that would never entirely heal. Her delusions increased their hold: she thought she was under surveillance by the police for complicity in a recent million-franc railroad robbery. She shrank from the loneliness of a few days by herself, and her letters pursued the Countess on hasty trips to London to wrestle with Madame's "persecutors," such as the solicitors of Miss L. She had always grumbled, but now H.P.B.'s letters had a stricken sound: "I have no home, no one I can rely on implicitly . . . no one able to understand me thoroughly . . . I am tired of life and the struggles of that stone of Sisyphus . . . I am one

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

too many on this earth, that's all." In her own heart she was suspicious of everyone, but she could not resist flattery. After a lifetime of bending men to her will, the tired Old Woman had become easy prey to the ambitious. She secretly appointed innumerable successors, giving each a written certificate, and there was a free-for-all after her death, with Lady Caithness, Annie Besant, and William Q. Judge as headliners. Henry B. Foulke, a Philadelphia medium, flourishing an "appointment" though he had never even met Madame and was not a member of the Society, started a controversy hot enough to be taken up by the secular press, and to fill long columns of papers like the *Wilkes-Barre Times*.

Madame's depression that winter in Ostend was due in part to another capital blow. After incredible exertion, she had managed to put together in primordial disorder a mass of material intended for *Secret Doctrine*. Originally, stung by mocking criticism, she had planned merely to rewrite *Isis Unveiled*. But without the guiding hand of Dr. Wilder, her collaborator-in-chief, it was futile to attempt such a task. When she met Subba Row, she recognized him as the ideal collaborator for whom she had sought the world around. He tried to hold back, but she was overpowering. Her plan to rewrite *Isis* developed into an ambitious new book, authorized and outlined by the Mahatmas. She even had a title page printed with Subba Row's name in the same type as hers and his degrees and titles importantly displayed. When he continued reluctant, the Mahatmas commanded the work to proceed, and Subba Row yielded.

The Psychical Research investigation was a gruelling experience for Subba Row, but Hodgson named him as one of the few Indians who gave honest assistance. After it was all over, Subba Row resigned from the Society, but he did not break off all relations. With H.P.B. and her phenomena in exile, Adyar was a quite different place. He liked the Colo-

## HELENA UNVEILED

nel and for a time continued to assist with the *Theosophist*, which offered a valued outlet for his recondite articles. But he firmly refused to "edit" any more manuscript for Madame.

Undeterred, H.P.B. continued her work until she had a pile of several thousand sheets of paper. She had them copied by a new invention, the typewriter, at a cost of four hundred dollars in order to have a legible copy for Subba Row. The maid Louise brought her husband in to pack the manuscript, wrapped as though it were jewels, corded, and sewn in oilcloth to protect it against the dampness of the sea trip. The Countess dispatched it from London in November 1886, insuring it for one thousand dollars and hurrying to catch the first Indian mail because Madame said that Subba Row was impatient for it to arrive and was inquiring of the Colonel every day when to expect it.

In due time a letter from the Colonel brought the bad news. Subba Row had been most uncomplimentary, had said the manuscript was a hopeless jumble, and had refused to permit his name to be associated with it. Madame took to her bed; she was really a sick woman now, suffering from acute conditions of heart and kidneys. Strange phenomena attended the illness, and the Countess, convinced that the end was near, sent to England for a consulting physician. She had a lawyer draw up a will disposing of Madame's manuscript and her rings—her only property—and she summoned the Gebhards, her only friends.

The Keightleys, two wealthy young Englishmen, appeared suddenly to inquire about the possibility of bringing Madame back to London. Their visit had a tonic effect. H.P.B. announced that on the previous night a Master had required her to choose between being permitted to die and join the Brotherhood in Tibet or taking a new lease on life in order to finish her book. She wanted death, but, sacrificing herself for mankind, she chose life, whereupon the

### *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

Master had cured her instantly. She insisted on being dressed and sitting up that very day. A new way of life opened before her. She had found new collaborators, the Keightleys, and was going back to England to make a fresh start.

## CHAPTER XVIII



### *SECRET DOCTRINE*

(1887—90)

AS SOON as Madame Blavatsky was able to travel, she was escorted back to England. The libel suit had been settled out of court, and she had acquired in the nick of time two ardent new disciples, the Keightleys, Bertram and his nephew Dr. Archibald. They were everything that appealed to H.P.B., young men, wealthy, university graduates, fascinated by occultism and Madame, indifferent to the findings of Psychical Researchers regardless of their academic prestige.

The Keightleys had cherished shining memories of H.P.B. ever since her triumphal summer of 1884. In Ostend she had shown them her manuscript, and they had eagerly promised to help her put it in shape. If she would come to England and live with them, they would secure whatever assistance she needed. It was one of the stabs that age inflicts that H.P.B.'s recent efforts to lure writing men to her side had failed. She was painfully conscious that she must have more than the clerical assistance of the Countess, and she was glad to move to England to secure collaborators. The Keightleys helped the Countess in the difficult process of getting Madame moved, "a truly terrible undertak-



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

ing," as Bertram put it. H.P.B. insisted on working at her desk until the last moment, imperiously demanding this reference work or that in spite of their lying packed at the bottom of large boxes of books.

Arrived at Maycott, the Keightleys' suburban villa on May 3, 1887, they struggled through the reverse situation. Madame gave them one day to get settled; at six the next morning she leaned back in her easy chair and went to work, expecting to find everything arranged for her convenience, and all her books within reach. In addition to the Keightleys, H.P.B. found a young woman, Mabel Collins, a friend of Bertram's, in the villa. Mabel, a niece of Wilkie Collins, was also a successful novelist. H.P.B. was not too well pleased. She liked the undivided attention of her men, but Mabel was a medium, and that helped.

At first Madame was homesick for Ostend, where the household had revolved about her exclusively, but she let the faithful Countess drift out of her life without protest. Although Madame inspired prodigal devotion, she herself maintained a cool detachment. She used her associates instead of loving them. She put it frankly in a letter to her sister. She was frightened and puzzled, she said, by the lavish affection of her followers: "I would give the last drop of my blood for Theosophy"—which was part of herself—"but as for the Theosophists, I hardly love any one of them personally. I can't love anyone personally but you of my *own blood*."<sup>1</sup>

For a little while Madame wrote homesick letters to the Countess, who had returned to Sweden; she was "in the enemy's camp"; the house was too small; "we tread uninterruptedly on each others' corns"; when there were four people in her room "we sit on each others' heads." And there was no such thing as quiet; every sound was heard all over the house. A good deal of the noise was made by H.P.B., for her relations with Mabel Collins had deterio-

<sup>1</sup> *Path*, October 1895.

## SECRET DOCTRINE

rated rapidly. One of their quarrels was witnessed by an embarrassed girl, Alice Cleather, who later became a leading Blavatsky devotee. She had managed to save enough to buy a ticket to London from her home in Eastbourne. Bertram Keightley, knowing of her eagerness to meet Madame, arranged an appointment and met her at the station. As they walked down the quiet residential street, Alice heard half way down the block the clatter of angry voices. "The Old Lady in one of her tempers," Bertram casually explained. After some delay, Bertram returned with apologies. The Old Lady was in a bad humor and refused to see her. The girl returned home sadly, savings gone and hopes dashed. Her reaction was typical of Theosophists: the reason that the Old Lady refused to see her was that "I was unworthy."<sup>2</sup>

Beneath the tantrums and explosions, H.P.B. was trying to bring herself to take advantage of Mabel Collins's talent. Since joining the London Lodge in 1884, Mabel had written a series of slender booklets, mystically poetic yet simply phrased, a refreshing contrast to the verbosity of much of the literature of occultism. The title page of Mabel's 1885 booklet was to become a storm center of controversy, but it read innocently enough:

### LIGHT ON THE PATH

*A Treatise written for the personal use of those who are ignorant of the Eastern Wisdom and who desire to enter within its influence.*

*Written down by M. C.*

The implication of the words *written down* appealed to Madame and she announced that the Masters dictated to Mabel as well as to herself. *Light on the Path* is still a Theosophical best-seller. Its opening lines bespeak its passive mood:

Kill out ambition.

Kill out desire for life.

<sup>2</sup> Alice L. Cleather: *H. P. Blavatsky as I Knew Her*.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

Kill out desire for comfort.

Work as those work who are ambitious. Respect life as those do who desire it. Be happy as those are who live for happiness. . . ."

Mabel Collins had a gift for haunting phrases: "Before the eyes can see, they must be incapable of tears." Mabel was in every way a foil for Madame. She was tall and graceful. Her auburn hair and delicate coloring gave her an ethereal quality and made her look younger than her actual thirty-five years. The contrast with H.P.B.'s untidy shapelessness did not endear her to the Old Lady, but when the first number of Madame's new magazine appeared in September, it bore Mabel's name as sub-editor on the front page. Madame in her haste to secede from Adyar had set up a rival magazine while she was still editor of *The Theosophist*.

Eager to make Madame comfortable, in the autumn of 1887, the Keightleys moved into a more imposing residence, more centrally located, and gave her a suite on the ground floor. Her bedroom opened into a large study overlooking the green solitude of a private park. Racks of reference books flanked her desk and she was surrounded by mementoes of past years, Bengal bronzes, Palghat carpets, Moradabad platters, Sinhalese images. At once she settled down to her accustomed routine, sitting at her desk from six to six, a twelve hour day. After the isolation of the Continent, she at first enjoyed the callers who crowded about her after dinner, but the novelty wore off and she reserved her evenings for her game of patience surrounded by her intimates. The public was received on Saturdays:

MADAME BLAVATSKY

AT HOME

Saturdays, 4 to 10 o'clock,  
18 Lansdowne Road,  
Notting Hill, W.

## SECRET DOCTRINE

A day or two after her arrival, H.P.B. had turned over to the Keightleys a pile of manuscript three feet high, over six thousand pages, asking them to "read, punctuate, correct the English, alter and generally treat it as if it were your own." The flattered Keightleys' first step was to assemble a little staff of experts. Ed Fawcett, a young scientist, not only supplied appropriate quotations in his field, but wrote many pages for the scientific sections. Richard Harte, American journalist, old friend of Olcott's, produced a commentary on the stanzas from the Book of Dzyan that were the inspiration of the entire work: they were supposed to be translations from "the oldest book in the world," written in Senzar, an extinct sacred language. The staff went to work, separating the stanzas into slokas (verses), pasting each sloka at the head of a sheet of paper, and adding any relevant questions or comments from the manuscript or out of their own heads. Harte was especially helpful in devising illuminating questions about the stanzas.

Ploughing down through three feet of manuscript was a formidable task. When it was done, the Keightleys faced Madame unhappily. They dared not tell her that it was an incoherent jumble, "another *Isis Unveiled* only worse so far as absence of plan and consecutiveness were concerned."<sup>3</sup> They did tell her that she would have to reorganize it on some definite plan. H.P.B. swore, grumbled that she was sick of the thing, and washed her hands of it, "handed over the manuscript to us and told us to go to hell and get on with it." In the end the staff worked out a simple and obvious outline. They divided the work into four volumes, each to consist of three parts: the stanzas of Dzyan and commentaries, symbolism, and science.

For sequence, they advised beginning with the evolution of the cosmos in Volume I, passing on to the evolution of man in II, presenting the historical background and lives of the great occultists in III, and practical occultism in IV.

<sup>3</sup> Bertram Keightley: *Reminiscences of H.P.B.*

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

With a sigh of relief H.P.B. accepted their entire plan, and the staff undertook to distribute the six thousand pages under the headings indicated, much as one might sort jumbled heaps of playing cards.

Nobody remembered to wonder about the outline dictated by the Master Koot Hoomi during the final days at Adyar. That plan had proved so inadequate that these two average young men, the Keightleys, were obliged to revamp it completely, which seems hard on Koot Hoomi as a planner. The fact that *Secret Doctrine* was produced in this halting, disjointed fashion was kept fairly quiet by the oaths of secrecy imposed on her assistants, and Madame continued to insist that she was a mere amanuensis, taking down her books at supernatural dictation. She even had the hierarchy issue formal certificates to assure her followers that *Secret Doctrine* was "the triple production" of two of the Masters and Upasika.

For anyone who has ever tried to write a simple exposition based on a logical outline, this story of the *Secret Doctrine* on the assembly line is indeed revealing. It explains why Madame's books make such difficult reading, and how they were really written. Cultivating Oriental scholars, Kabbalists, Rosicrucians, owners of libraries on occultism, she picked their brains and their shelves, took copious notes, threw the material together, and depended upon her bemused admirers to reduce the confusion to some sort of order. In view of the circumstances, her two chief works, incoherent and rambling though they may be, are indeed remarkable productions.

*Secret Doctrine* has stood the test of time better than the earlier book and is the source of nearly all the numerous pamphlet reprints from Madame's works. *Isis Unveiled* was, in the main, an accumulation of the folklore of occultism. *Secret Doctrine* undertook the sterner task of providing an encyclopedic textbook of Theosophy. The title referred to Madame's quest of many years, the secret doctrine

## SECRET DOCTRINE

of the Ancient Wisdom. The book did not undertake to present the entire teaching, only fragments; it would be centuries before much more was released. The keys to the Zodiacal Mysteries "must be turned seven times before the whole system is divulged."

The book's subtitle, *The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, suggests the ambitious size of the canvas. Volume one described the universe in terms of millions of years and trillions of miles; "The accumulated Wisdom of the Ages . . . its cosmogony alone is the most stupendous and elaborate system even in the exotericism of the Puranas (Hindu classics)." Volume two dealt with Man from the evolution of life on this planet several hundred million years ago down to the year 1888, chronicling his progress in Rounds, Races, and sub-Races. The fourth Race flourished 850,000 years ago on the fabled island of Atlantis. Anglo-Saxons belong to the fifth sub-race of the seven that make up this Root Race. California has been honored as the cradle of the next, the sixth sub-Race that is beginning to emerge under the influence of the beneficent California sunshine. The manuscript of Volume three was typed by the Keightleys, and Volume four was nearly finished, but both disappeared after Madame's death. Annie Besant has been accused of suppressing them as part of her effort to crowd Madame Blavatsky out of the picture. A posthumous volume of Madame's writings, edited and published by Mrs. Besant, is rejected by the orthodox Blavatskian as having been impudently altered and edited!

Publication of *Secret Doctrine* was postponed several times. Now that H.P.B. had her own publishing house, she could indulge her passion for revising, and the Keightleys paid the printer fifteen hundred dollars for corrections. When the two volumes appeared, Theosophists bowed low before a new revelation. George Russell, famous Irish mystic and poet, better known as A. E., considered *Secret Doctrine* the most exciting and stimulating book written in the

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

last hundred years, and credited H.P.B. with inspiring all that was best in his own writings. Writers in the secular press, on the other hand, took it as they had taken *Isis Unveiled*, rather humorously. Far from amusing, it infuriated one old scholar. William Emmette Coleman of San Francisco devoted several years to exposing the falsity of Madame's pretensions, and took the offensive in a picturesque literary duel. Photographs of Mr. Coleman show a subject for the caricaturist, gaunt face and high forehead set on a thin neck, with square steel spectacles over his deepset eyes. An authority on palæography, he was a member of the Pali Text Society, the Royal Asiatic Society, and other learned organizations. Coleman lacked a sense of humor, and it maddened him to observe H.P.B.'s irreverent trifling with subjects that were his major interest in life. "Some have thought me harsh about this woman, but the truth is often harsh . . . I have never said aught concerning her but what I was firmly convinced was the truth. I try to be scrupulously conscientious." H.P.B. replied to his charges with personal abuse of Coleman and "his lying billingsgate."

After pulling *Secret Doctrine* to pieces under a microscope, Coleman repeated the charges of plagiarism and fraud made against *Isis*. There was no reference in all literature to this alleged "oldest book in the world." The language *Senzar* was unknown to the most learned philologists. The so-called "Stanzas of Dzyan" were compiled by Madame from various nineteenth-century reference books, and for the work as a whole she had depended largely on two books, Wilson's *Vishnu Purana* and Winchell's *World Life*, mixed up with smatterings of Paracelsus, Eliphas Lévi, Buddha, Brahmanism, Eugenius Philalethes, and the cabala. Coleman was especially annoyed by H.P.B.'s habit of blithely twisting authorities around to suit her purpose and he solemnly counted more than six hundred false statements relating to Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Assyriology, Egyptology, and Christianity. Patiently Coleman ex-

## SECRET DOCTRINE

posed gross ignorance not only of Eastern philosophy but of the spelling of such well known names as the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which Madame referred to several times as the *Ba-gaved Gitta*; and he commented that only an ignoramus could omit the *h* which follows *b* in Sanskrit. He devoted a damaging section to conflicts between *Isis* and *Secret Doctrine* on such basic theories as reincarnation and the septenary constitution of man. While H.P.B. might commendably grow in understanding and change her opinions between the two books, such afterthoughts are not permitted to Mahatmas revealing Ultimate Truth. Coleman also examined the Mahatma letters and discovered that, as in Madame's other works, they discreetly limited their quotations from Eastern literature to passages available in translation; most of the Buddhist scripture, for instance, came from Beal's *Catena of Buddhist Scriptures from the Chinese*. (See Appendix M, page 337.)

This devastating criticism was supported by other scholars. Horace Howard Furness, Regent of the University of Pennsylvania wrote to express his gratitude for the "masterly review of the Blavatsky," congratulating Coleman on the dignified style in which he had demolished "flimsy pasteboard chimeras which demand as much skill to smash as if they were real." Epes Sargent of Boston, with whom Madame had once fallen in love, wrote that her remarks on reincarnation were a jumble of contradictory statements and "read like the ravings of a lunatic."

Scholars might pour out vials of scorn upon H.P.B., but they could not annihilate her. It was a left-handed compliment when the greatest among them dignified her pretensions with a thoughtful reply. Professor Max Müller of Oxford University, supreme among Orientalists for his life work, a forty-eight-volume translation of the *Sacred Books of the East*, found in her material "endless blunders," denied the existence of her Mahatmas in numerous books and articles, and even delivered a course of lectures on The-



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

osophy. In an article in *The Nineteenth Century and After*, Professor Müller showed his capacity for human understanding as well as scholarship. He had read Vera's biography of her sister in *La Nouvelle Revue*, and he invited Olcott to his home for luncheon and a confidential interview. He concluded that Madame Blavatsky had been a wild, excitable girl with an unfortunate weakness for vulgar exhibitions of magic, and he thought she had probably been victimized by some of the Pundits she had consulted. Olcott told him that she was convinced that every religion must have its miracles—they were the manure that made it grow—and this conviction had gradually led her into the most barefaced tricks. She had begun her career, Professor Müller continued, "not without a premature acquaintance with the darker side of life, not without a weakness for notoriety. After a time she ceased to be truthful either to herself or to others." In spite of her frailties, Müller recognized something real amid the rhinestones, and he credited her with catching a glimpse, here and there "of those wonderful philosophical intuitions which are treasured up in the sacred books of the East."<sup>4</sup>

### 2. THE E. S. DICTATORSHIP

(1887)

The financial backing of the Keightleys made Madame independent of Olcott, and she hastened to implement her freedom. Within a month of her return to England she wrote him a letter that indicated her resilience, how fast she could swing from the utter slump of the last weeks in Würzburg back to her managing, contriving self. Her letter must have left Olcott feeling dazed; one-two-three she gave him her budget of news:

Item 1. She was forming her own Blavatsky Lodge of Theosophists in London; Sinnett had been so stuffy that

<sup>4</sup> *Nineteenth Century*, May 1893.

## SECRET DOCTRINE

he was to be left out in the cold, and she had already captured fourteen of his best Theosophists. She significantly omitted the usual formalities in regard to the new Lodge's relation to Headquarters.

Item 2. She was founding her own magazine and publishing house. Some friends were putting up \$7,500 for the publishing company, which would print the magazine and also her book, emancipating her from the tyranny of publishers with their deadlines and their annoying bills for corrections.

Item 3. She was establishing a secret organization within her Lodge to be known as the Esoteric Section—the E. S. Only picked members would be admitted and they must take a seven-fold pledge which would include vows of: *Absolute Obedience*, “and in particular to obey without cavil or delay the orders of the Head of the E. S. in all that concerns my relation with the Theosophical Movement”; *Secrecy*, “never to listen without protest to any evil thing spoken of a brother theosophist and to abstain from condemning others.”

Every probationer must accept and practice the ascetic discipline: no meat, no alcohol, etc., and must spend several hours every day in meditation, gazing fixedly at a photograph of the portrait of the Master and trying to imagine that He was actually standing in the room. As the representative of the Master who was the real Head of the Section, H.P.B. would give individual instruction to the probationers and alone would pass on admission of candidates, promotions, and rewards. Her decisions would be final and must be accepted without argument or criticism as the judgment of “*those who know*.”

H.P.B. had long cherished ambitions to establish herself with dictatorial powers, and she was coming into the open after years of undercover preparation. Most of her Indian chelas were easy victims of such a policy, and before leaving India she had begun indoctrinating a few key Europeans.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

As far back as the summer of 1884, the Masters had been preaching Absolute Obedience in England. No force, wrote Koot Hoomi, could stand up against Theosophy "if every Fellow [of the T. S.] took for his motto the wise words of a young boy, 'I am a Theosophist before I am an Englishman.'"<sup>5</sup>

Olcott was alarmed by H.P.B.'s letter; he feared that she would wreck the Society. He pointed out that she was undermining her international organization and setting up a competitor to her own official magazine, *The Theosophist*. He also distrusted and opposed the policy underlying the E. S. and reminded her of a similar effort in India four years earlier that had ended disastrously. For two successive years Olcott made the long trip from Adyar to England trying to stay H.P.B.'s hand. Several of the older members joined in his protests. Sinnett refused to accept membership in the E. S. even though H.P.B. offered him personal exemption from the pledges to which he objected. Olcott and Sinnett, for once on the same side, realized that H.P.B. had been driven underground by the Society for Psychical Research. The E. S. was to be her device for continuing her marvels, protected as she trustingly believed by new strike-me-dead vows. H.P.B.'s impulsive nature, her love of mystification, and her willingness to let the ends justify use of the most unscrupulous means, made her old friends fear that she could not be trusted with such arbitrary power. Both men saw danger signals ahead, and they were right. Within a year it was necessary to clean house, expel several members of the select E. S., and supplement it with something still more secret, the I. G. (Inner Group). The E. S. and its successors have been storm centers of controversy from that day to this.

The succeeding split between the Founders highlighted the distinction between two schools of Theosophical thought. Colonel Olcott represented the Exoteric, which

<sup>5</sup> *Letters M.W.*, I, 21.

## SECRET DOCTRINE

may be defined not only as "intelligible to outsiders," but also as "commonplace." The Colonel was at heart a genial, provincial Christian. His years of intimacy with the pagan H.P.B. and of preaching Buddhism failed to alter his habit of heading notes in his diary "Easter Sunday" or "Whitsunday." He wanted the Society to preach the Golden Rule, with poetic thoughts about Eternity and the Mahatmas for atmosphere, and with a dash of his own mesmeric healing as the limit of its efforts to tap the supernatural. To H.P.B. this was old stuff, boring and bourgeois. She was exclusively interested in an Esoteric school, limited to initiates, and all bound round with secrecy. Her Theosophy required access to the supernatural; it demanded tolerance for beliefs and practises commonly exploited by charlatans for a livelihood. This esoteric principle, a doctrine for the select few, who therefore were not bound by ordinary conventions, was the heart of H.P.B.'s teaching. The flattery of its appeal enabled her to survive all the exposures and ridicule and attacks upon her personal life.

After more than a year of wrangling, during which they said very blunt things about each other, the Founders patched up their controversy. Inevitably, Olcott gave in and meekly issued an Order in Council dated October 9, 1888, officially sanctioning the E. S. with Madame Blavatsky at its head. Olcott was still at her service, spending several months in Paris arbitrating disputes and trying to resuscitate the French section. The German section had disintegrated after the resignation of Dr. Hübbe-Schleiden. General Doubleday had taken no interest in the American section beyond permitting H.P.B. to use his name as President. The international organization was almost as tenuous as its Mahatmas.

Suddenly a challenging figure loomed upon the American scene, Dr. Elliott Coues of Washington, D. C., a well-known scientist, an ornithologist best known for his *Key to North American Birds* and as scientific consultant on the staff of

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

the *Century Dictionary*. A man of distinguished presence, tall, genial, and vivacious, he was also an aggressive and unforgiving antagonist. He had known the Founders in the old Lamasery days and had been a guest at the Gebhards that famous summer of '84 when he had watched Madame closely. A man of his talent was a godsend for the moribund American branch, and he was appointed Chairman of the Board of Control. He soon aspired to take the presidency away from the inventor of baseball, and at a convention in Chicago in 1888 made himself the sensation of the hour by receiving a letter from a Mahatma. H.P.B. was very cross about this; it was against the rules to receive such letters except through her. But when she remonstrated, Dr. Coues replied with a verve and style startlingly like her own. Signing himself Darius Hystaspes II, he jeered at "the psychologized baby Olcott" and "the meek Hibernian Judge," and even dared to patronize "the greatest woman of the age," whom he said he admired "as only a man of genius can." It was *lèse-majesté*. Madame had brought Hume to book for much less. It is a coincidence that he too was an authority on birds! When she tried to put Dr. Coues in his place, he would not stay put, and in the process she enraged him.

Looking for the best spot to attack H.P.B., the Doctor struck up a correspondence with Mabel Collins, whom he had never met. She had lasted seventeen months as sub-editor, had then been refused admission to the E. S., and had disappeared abruptly from the magazine, from Madame's favor, and from the Keightley residence. Dr. Coues published on May 11, 1889 Mabel's confession that Madame's Mahatmas had nothing to do with her "writing down" *Light on the Path* and other inspirational brochures. "Written down by M. C." was just an expression; she was the author of the book and she had written it down. She had permitted the interpretation that her work was dictated by the Master Koot Hoomi only because of very urgent appeals. "H.P.B. begged and implored me." Madame's

## SECRET DOCTRINE

reply was to cancel the charter of the Washington branch and to expel the Doctor from the Theosophical Society.

The next play was by Dr. Coues. He inspired a sensational attack on Madame by the New York *Sun*; a withering editorial in June 1890, was followed by a full-page, seven-column exposé-interview with Dr. Coues under a streamer headline:

### THE TARTAR TERMAGANT TAMED BY SMITHSONIAN SCIENTIST

Pushing his picturesque vocabulary to its utmost, Dr. Coues let himself go.<sup>6</sup> He had first known the Theosophists in 1874 in New York, and had watched "their three card monte in which Blavatsky dealt, Olcott steered and Judge played the capper." He described Madame as "fat, gross, of abominable habit and intolerable tempers, swearing like a pirate and smoking like a chimney." The Doctor reviewed all the Theosophical scandals, the Coulomb letters, the Kiddle plagiarism, and Baron de Palm's manuscript, and he elaborated the charge that Madame had come to this country as a Russian spy and had gone to India in the same capacity.

Reaching back into the past, Dr. Coues brought out all the dirty linen of Madame's youth. That was when he stubbed his toe. In addition to sharing the fortunes of a man named Metrovitch, he charged, she had been a member of the Paris *demi-monde* during the years 1857-8, and had lived by her wits throughout the entire twenty-five years of her wanderings. He also accused her of a liaison with Prince Émile de Wittgenstein and bearing him a deformed son who died in Kiev in 1861. Here the Doctor slipped up. When H.P.B. first arrived in this country, she used to dazzle the natives with glimpses of crested letters from Prince Wittgenstein and the Baron Meyendorff. She took them with her to the Eddy farm to impress the Colonel and down

<sup>6</sup> *New York Sun*, July 20, 1890.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

to the *Graphic* office when she went to be interviewed. The Doctor picked the wrong man, naming the Prince, instead of Baron Meyendorf.

For a score of years the press of Europe and Asia had been familiar with, and had voluntarily suppressed, the details of H.P.B.'s early career. In spite of her vulnerability, she had lashed out in all directions until she felt herself immune. When the blow fell, it came from the New World. It is surprising that the New York *Sun* (Dana was still alive) considered this abusive attack worth a full page. Madame Blavatsky had left the country eleven years earlier; she had been a person of no great importance while here; her American following was negligible. The news value of the story attached not to H.P.B., but to the fact that a man of Dr. Coues's standing was willing to sponsor such spicy name-calling. There was also an element of our yokel susceptibility to scandals about princes and barons.

The legal staff of the *Sun*, which was then headed by Elihu Root, seems to have slipped up in passing the story without checking with its European office the names of the principals. This routine precaution would have caught the flagrant error, the name of Prince Wittgenstein. Madame Blavatsky took full advantage of the lapse. Ignoring numerous disagreeable charges that could not be answered, she issued her reply: she dismissed the *demi-monde* accusation as "so ridiculous as to arouse laughter," and concentrated on the false and foul calumny against Prince Wittgenstein, "an old friend of my family whom I saw for the last time when I was 18 years old . . . He was a cousin of the late Empress of Russia, and little thought that upon his grave would be thrown the filth of a modern New York newspaper . . ." <sup>7</sup> She instructed William Judge to file suit for libel against the *Sun*.

Delays and postponements carried the case along until after H.P.B.'s death, which, according to the law of New

<sup>7</sup> *Path*, September 1890.

### SECRET DOCTRINE

York State, automatically terminated the suit. However, four months later, the *Sun* voluntarily apologized for the Coues interview and, to make amends, printed a long tribute to Madame from the pen of William Judge. The *Sun* stated that it had been misled in admitting the Coues interview to its pages, and said that the Doctor's charges "appear to have been without solid foundation."

It was the nearest to a vindication that Madame ever attained, and it came after she was dead.

### 3. TWILIGHT OF THE MAHATMAS

(1889)

For any cause needing an inspired propagandist—and what cause doesn't?—Annie Besant was a dream come true. She was a radiant woman of forty-two, a gifted speaker, experienced pamphleteer and editor, heroine of numerous bizarre adventures. In a day when destitute ladies sponged on male relatives, however remote, rather than soil their fingers as wage-earners, Annie Besant was almost unique. After a brief and stormy marriage, she had abandoned her Lincolnshire vicar and her family background of titled and professional tradition in 1873, the summer that H.P.B. landed in New York. Supplementing her superficial education with night courses at the University of London, Mrs. Besant took firsts in seven sciences. For fifteen years she had supported herself very comfortably, running the gamut of radical causes from atheism and family limitation to Bernard Shaw's Fabian Socialism. She had won fame as an orator and had a devoted personal following. In spite of her successes she faced an impasse.

In getting rid of her vicar husband, Mrs. Besant had exiled herself from the Church, and she had searched ever since for a substitute, making the rounds of smart and shabby mediums, clairvoyants, and hypnotists. She was, she said, "studying the obscurer sides of consciousness,



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

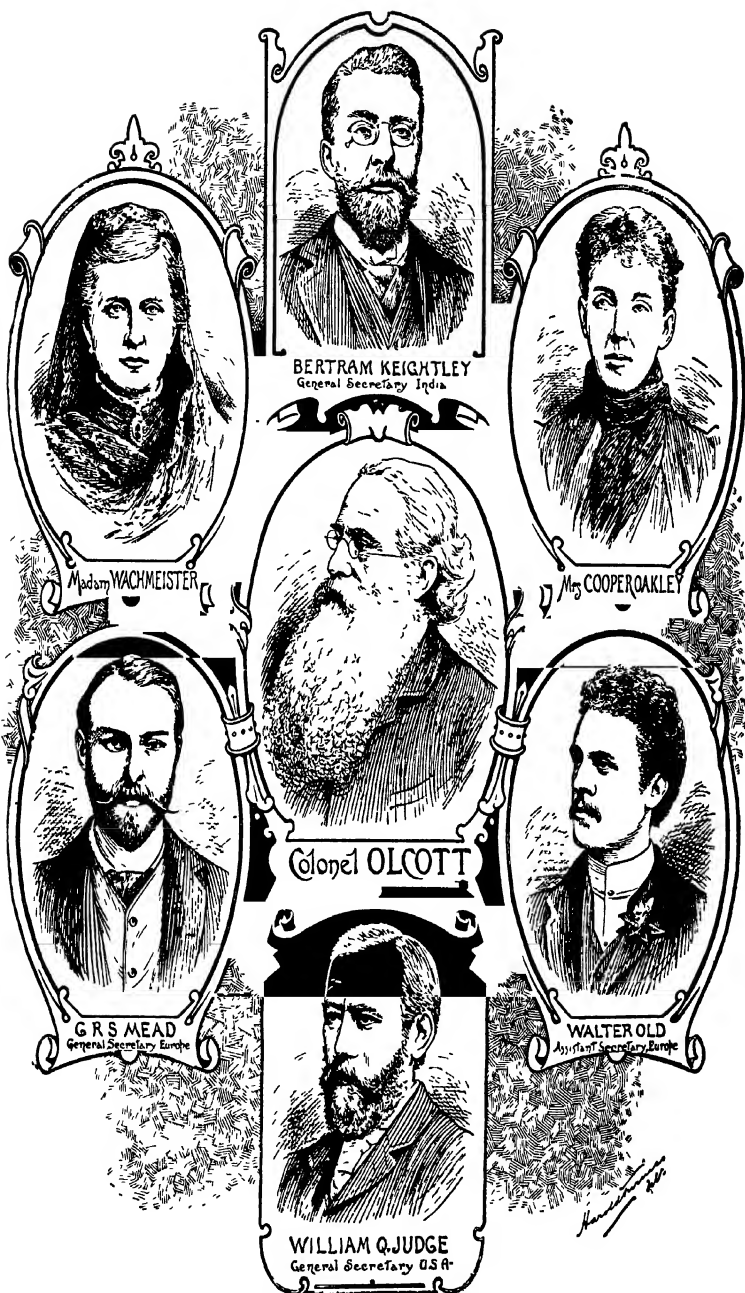
dreams, hallucinations, illusions, insanity. . . . Into the darkness shot a ray of light, A. P. Sinnett's *Occult World* with its wonderfully suggestive letters expounding, not the supernatural, but a nature under law, wider than I had dared to conceive." <sup>8</sup> The mystery of Theosophy thrilled her, the implication of something big and powerful watching her from around the corner. It made the world less lonely.

Opportunely in the spring of 1889, William T. Stead asked Mrs. Besant to review the two volumes of *Secret Doctrine*: "Can you review these?" he asked. "My young men all fight shy of them, but you are quite mad enough on these subjects to make something of them."

It was heavy going but she liked the challenge. "I am immersed in Madame Blavatsky," she wrote Stead. "If I perish in the attempt to review her, you must write on my tomb, 'She has gone to investigate the *Secret Doctrine* at first hand.'" Instead of perishing, she secured an appointment to call on Madame. She was shown into the study overlooking a green park. H.P.B. sat enthroned in a great armchair, and for a long electric moment these two dynamic women measured one another. Annie Besant looked eagerly, hungrily, into those mysterious azure eyes that had hypnotized so many yearning spirits.

When H.P.B. spoke, her harsh voice was almost tender: "My dear Mrs. Besant, I have so long wished to see you," and stretching out her hand, she held Annie's in a firm clasp. Watching her prospect with quiet confidence, H.P.B. led the conversation down innocuous bypaths. She talked brilliantly of her travels, adventures in far countries, famous people, "her eyes veiled, her exquisitely molded fingers rolling cigarettes incessantly." There was no talk of occultism, no touch of mystery. Madame was a woman of the world at ease in her drawing room. At the moment of farewell, for an instant, H.P.B. drew back the veil. Looking deep into her caller's eyes she said, with a throb in her voice:

<sup>8</sup> Annie Besant: *An Autobiography*, p. 339.



*Theosophists who knew H.P.B. in her later years*



*Annie Besant, who made a whirlwind surrender to Theosophy  
and became its crown princess*

## SECRET DOCTRINE

"Oh my dear Mrs. Besant, if you would only come among us!"

The younger woman struggled against an embarrassing compulsion to bend down and kiss this strange, fascinating creature whom she had barely met. Surprised by her own susceptibility, she controlled herself and made her conventional adieux; H.P.B., observing the byplay, was well satisfied. Later, their swift intimacy established, they were talking over that first meeting and H.P.B. laughed reminiscently. "Child," she said, "your pride is terrible; you are as proud as Lucifer himself."

It cost Annie Besant a severe wrench to announce her surrender to Theosophy, she who had so confidently repudiated religion for materialism as she barnstormed up and down England in partnership with the famous atheist, Charles Bradlaugh. Now a strange Russian woman had turned her world upside down. She returned to Lansdowne Road to ask Madame to take her as a pupil, but Madame put her off.

"Have you read the report about me of the S. P. R?" Madame asked her.

"No, I never heard of it as far as I know."

"Go and read it," said H.P.B. sternly, "and if, after reading it, you come back—well—" And she deftly changed the subject.

The leader of an occultist cult must be a good deal more than a fascinating conversationalist. Even personal magnetism scarcely explains it. Under the spell of H.P.B.'s magic, Mrs. Besant with her alert mind and scientific training could read the *Psychical Research Report* and dismiss it indignantly as "a vile attack on a noble woman." Richard Hodgson's application of scientific methods, his painstaking investigation and handling of evidence went for nothing:

Was the writer of the *Secret Doctrine* this miserable impostor, this accomplice of tricksters, this foul and loathsome deceiver, this conjurer with trap-doors and sliding panels? I laughed aloud

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

at the absurdity and flung the Report aside with the righteous scorn of an honest nature that knew its own kin when it met them and shrank from the foulness and baseness of a lie.

Annie Besant has left an intimate record of the process by which a woman with a good mind and natural integrity may surrender in all good faith to the suggestion of a nature stronger than her own. It was partly her own inner turmoil, her sense of frustration and loneliness, that made her so susceptible. In almost everyone a pitiful, small-child instinct survives to lean on someone bigger and wiser than he. Unconsciously, insidiously, Annie Besant was drawn into compromises, into tolerance of practices that she would once have repudiated with indignation.

Madame Blavatsky did not have long to wait for the latest neophyte. On an afternoon in early May, Annie Besant returned; deeply moved, she stood beside Madame's chair, then bent down and kissed her.

"You have joined the Society?" asked H.P.B.

"Yes."

"You have read the Report?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

Annie Besant knelt beside the old magician and said: "My answer is, will you accept me as your pupil and give me the honour of proclaiming you my teacher in the face of the world?"

H.P.B.'s inscrutable face softened, and there was an unwonted gleam of tears in her eyes as, with pontifical dignity, she placed her hand upon the head bent low before her and said: "You are a noble woman. May Master bless you."

The relationship progressed swiftly. Mrs. Besant had to attend a trade union congress in Paris in July, and the Old Lady, for once accommodating herself to the convenience of a chela, went along. Evading the austerities of the congress, H.P.B. stayed in Fontainebleau with a wealthy Amer-

## SECRET DOCTRINE

ican Theosophist, Mrs. Ida Candler, and there Annie presently joined her.

Even the elderly are permitted to experience a certain rejuvenescence from new and stimulating friendships, a tantalizing echo of the transports of youth. While Annie was sitting through the long days of speechmaking at the congress, H.P.B. worked off her new access of energy with a physical zest she had not shown for many years. She evidenced a sudden interest in sightseeing, and wrote her aunt letters that read like a *Baedeker*, boasting that she had visited forty-five of the fifty-eight rooms of the Palace of Fontainebleau on her own two legs.

At Fontainebleau Annie Besant beheld her first vision. She and Madame had established a most agreeable rapport as chela and guru. H.P.B. enjoyed a fresh audience for her repertory of taps, bells, and messages, and was pleased by her own success with this uncommonly intelligent woman. Annie surrendered eagerly to the atmosphere of mystery, but reveled even more in throwing off the bleak materialism of recent years and returning not to the remote Trinity she had abandoned with her husband, but to a crowding hierarchy of Masters, lurking in the corners of every room, likely to materialize at any instant. The two women slept in adjoining rooms. One night Annie woke with a start to find the room pulsing as with the flashing of an electric storm; suddenly the radiant, astral figure of her Master appeared, stood for an instant beside her bed, and vanished. Annie Besant had shown herself an apt pupil, and had matriculated in her guru's School of Esoterics with exemplary speed. From this time on she continued not only to see her Master at discreet intervals, but to hear his voice. She was even permitted to touch his hand.

These were comparatively serene days for H.P.B., an Indian summer of golden sunshine and magical twilights after prolonged storms. For the first time in the long years of her rebellious, reckless life, she could lean back and relax. Her

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

financial worries were over. The wealth of the Keightleys had been supplemented by the devotion of this accomplished woman. H.P.B. had reached the point where even jealousy was fading away; instead of resenting Annie's masterful ways she gratefully accepted her competence. It was especially pleasant to H.P.B. that, in spite of all the blunders, here at the end she had again been taken up by the smart world. The society journalists put her down on their beat and wrote amusing skits about The Female Pope of Theosophy. They gave her an enthusiastic sendoff on the opening of her new residence and headquarters on July 25, 1890.

For Annie Besant had picked up her guru and her society and carried them both off bodily to her own spacious home, which she had formally deeded to the Theosophists. The new residence on Avenue Road, even more imposing than the Keightleys' establishment, was set in ample grounds with trees, shrubbery, and flowers, surrounded by a high brick wall. The wall was symbolical. Members of the Society and old friends from all over the world with memories of Madame's bohemian hospitality in New York and India found themselves no longer welcome. Only the inner coterie had entrée. Madame felt no regrets. She was, she said, glad to escape from "the mystical vampires."

In truth she was failing rapidly; her fighting days were over. She was entering her sixtieth year, a milestone that tests the courage of many a stout heart. She had lived hard those threescore years, packing into each day a shattering intensity of joy and rage, ambition and despair. For the last half of her life she had defied every rule of hygiene, taking no exercise, eating too much rich and fattening food, smoking too much, raging too much, until at sixty she was a physical wreck, a repulsive mountain of flesh. But she still retained her magnificent eyes, her imperious will, her robust sense of humor, her richness of personality. Impulsively she bestowed upon Mrs. Besant in swift succession control of the

## SECRET DOCTRINE

magazine and her correspondence, and general administrative responsibility. Fortunately for H.P.B. she never knew, unless she was able to look down from some Theosophical Valhalla, what this precocious new chela did with her precious T. S. She did not live long enough to see Annie—herself betrayed by the vagaries of occultism—lead the Society down strange, perverted byways from which Madame would have recoiled in horror. Instead, and if the Mahatmas were responsible, they were good to her in this: she knew only the ineffable relief for a tired old woman of letting her burdens slide through her fingers into the outstretched hands of her devoted chela.

On the whole, Madame's program was making satisfactory progress. After fifteen years of using Olcott as the figurehead of the Society, she had, in August 1890, assumed the title of President of the European Section; Olcott had been forced to grant complete autonomy to both the European and American sections, leaving Adyar little more than memories of the past until after his death, when Mrs. Besant restored its former glory. The bifurcations of the Inner oh-so-secret societies had begun, spreading out quietly like mushrooms in a cellar.

Madame's magazine, *Lucifer*, was forging ahead, and she had recently published a brochure that was to be the most widely read and the most beloved of all her writings. A collection of aphorisms translated, like the "Stanzas of Dzyan" from the mysterious Senzar language, it was called *The Voice of the Silence*. In the last few years a single American section of the Theosophical movement, the United Lodge of Theosophists, has sold 30,000 copies of this little book.

Annie Besant, taking over responsibility from Madame, laid out ambitious plans for research with the assistance of Madame's brilliant young secretary, G. R. S. Mead, a Cambridge man, a scholar, and a mystic of genuine integrity. Mrs. Besant also made elaborate alterations in her house



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

for the Society's use, and provided for the supersecret I. G. a supersecret Inner Room having no windows and with a ceiling of a special shade of blue selected by H.P.B. for its mystical influence. Only the *very* elect even knew of the room's existence; what happened there is still a secret. One after another, most of the original Inner Group resigned, alienated and disillusioned; Mead held on until 1909. But they went to their graves refusing to expose the gravest abuses, feeling that nothing could release them from their oaths of secrecy.

Behind the walls of Annie's castle, behind the tenderly protective shield of Annie herself, H.P.B. nestled back for her last half year of life as sheltered as an incubator baby. A photograph shows her in a curious outsize perambulator, surrounded by the shrubbery of Annie's garden, attended by young men chelas, her secretary, Mr. Mead, on one side, and on the other an absentminded-looking mystic, James Pryse, who is clutching her tobacco box. Madame sits enthroned, swathed in shawls, the gleaming covers of the padded go-cart closed over her lap like the lid of a coffin. The picture suggests the hothouse atmosphere into which she had snuggled.

To the very end, H.P.B. maintained a trickle of articles for the magazine, her subjects ever more remote and abstruse. In the March *Lucifer* she interpreted Ormuzd and Ahriman, a Persian allegory based on a Zoroastrian theme, with a title in her own inimitable style, *The Devil's Own*. Annie Besant's first project was a publicity campaign in defense of her new guru. She was sure that the story had never been properly presented to the public; the former assistants must have been easily frightened. Annie briefed the case for Madame in a series of terse propositions. The first sentence summarized the situation with admirable brevity: "Either she is a messenger from the Masters or else she is a fraud."

## CHAPTER XIX



# INTO THE SILENCE

(1891)

ALL her life Madame had been fascinated by death. It shadowed her childhood fantasies; her aunt's memoir—dictated by H.P.B.—charged that the child Helena had “an unaccountable attraction to and at the same time fear of the dead.”

Most of H.P.B.'s rare attempts at fiction were horror stories surcharged with torture and killing. The Master K. H. even attempted an intimate description of the reality behind the mystery of death:

At the last moment, the whole life is reflected in our memory and emerges from all the forgotten nooks and corners, picture after picture, one event after another. . . . Even a madman or one in a fit of *delirium tremens* will have his instant of perfect lucidity . . . the brain thinks and the EGO lives in these few brief seconds, his whole life over again. . . . Speak in whispers, ye who assist at a death-bed and find yourselves in the solemn presence of Death. Especially have ye to keep quiet just after Death has laid her clammy hand upon the body . . .<sup>1</sup>

Her deathbed was a device frequently used by Madame to command attention. On various occasions, she nominated a dozen different people as her successor, made wills,

<sup>1</sup> *Lucifer*, October 1889.

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

left final instructions. The Colonel had solemnly promised that no one but he should see her face after death. He was to sew her up in a cloth and have her cremated. Her inability to forget death, whistling to conceal her fear, may be a clue to some of the strange behavior patterns that puzzled and grieved those who loved her.

Now at last Madame was approaching the grim presence. She had failed rapidly during the winter of 1890-1. Perhaps life had become too easy. She had made such a valiant effort, had overcome such insuperable difficulties, that with lack of opposition she lost her incentive. The Wheel of Life was turning slowly, slowly; sometimes her chelas could not be sure that it was moving at all. For several years Madame had been suffering from Bright's disease, rheumatism, and a bad heart; her condition was now aggravated by an attack of influenza. She struggled against giving up and, whenever she could hold up her head, angrily insisted on staggering back to her work table, shuffling her papers over and over, dictating letters, messages, snatches of articles. In April 1891, Mrs. Besant left to attend the American Section's convention in Chicago, and H.P.B. asked her to deliver her message, sad words from a shadowed valley:

Suffering in body as I am continually, the only consolation that remains to me is to hear the progress of the Holy Cause to which my health and strength have been given, but to which, now that these are going, I can only offer my passionate devotion.<sup>2</sup>

Increasingly she used words like Holy Cause, with their ecclesiastical flavor, phrases reminiscent of the childhood religion that she had bitterly reviled all her life. Approaching the darkness of the end, she humbled her pride and secretly joined the host of rebel spirits who, at the last minute, creep back to Holy Church. In the privacy of her own heart, her confidential Mahatmas, her occult powers fell away, and she was left in that stark isolation which comes one day to

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous: *The Theosophical Movement*, p. 281.

## INTO THE SILENCE

every man. She confided in her sister, pretending that it was part of her passionate loyalty to Russia. She had been called, she wrote Vera, and she had called herself, a heathen, and it was quite true that she detested "Anglican Phariseism and the Pope's Christianity," but when she read about the spread of Russian Orthodoxy in Japan her heart rejoiced. She abhorred all religious rituals except—she confessed it shyly—"except that of our own church service." She tried to make a joke of it: she must have a bee in her bonnet, it was so silly and inconsistent, but there it was.

She even admitted that at Fontainebleau she used to slip off to Paris by herself to visit the Russian Cathedral, its beautiful golden domes towering above the greenness of the Parc Monceau. Inside the church, the sight of the old familiar ikons and symbols had been almost too much for her. "I stood with my mouth open, as if standing before my own dear mother whom I have not seen for years and who could not recognize me."<sup>3</sup> Touched by this wistful reference to their mother, Vera wrote to the Reverend E. Smirnoff, the priest attached to the Russian Embassy in London, and asked him to call. Helena received him eagerly, and was grateful for this tardy reconciliation, but it must be kept secret. Her public must never know.

H.P.B.'s final message, *My Books*, written on April 28, 1891, ten days before her death, was an apologia not for herself but for her Mahatmas.<sup>4</sup> It was a last passionate effort to breathe life into those wraithlike figures, her brain-children. Disarmingly, she admitted the worst about *Isis*, its misquotations, repetitions, and digressions; these errors were all the fault of her assistants and of the publisher, the printers, the proofreaders.

Her concern was to establish the inspired authorship of all "my books," *Isis* included. She owed only the most superficial aid to her human assistants, and she categorically

<sup>3</sup> *Path*, November 1895.

<sup>4</sup> *Lucifer*, May 15, 1891.

## *PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT*

denied receiving help of any importance from the Baron de Palm manuscript, from Dr. Wilder, Olcott, Eliphas Lévi . . . On the other hand, she freely admitted that "neither the ideas nor the teachings" in her books were really hers; every word came from "the teachings of our Eastern Masters," and much of it "had been written by me under their dictation." Surely, and here was the crux of the matter, if she were willing to relinquish credit for the authorship of her only monuments, her books, such a statement must forever establish the reality of her gurus. At the end of her checkered span of sixty years, which covered so many secrets, such wild rebellions, such hours of anguish, this indomitable woman was concerned only to safeguard her claim for the reality of her Masters Morya and Koot Hoomi and all the hierarchy.

Madame closed her essay with a quotation from Montaigne: "I have here made only a nosegay of culled flowers, and have brought nothing of my own but the string that ties them." And she added sadly, "Is anyone of my helpers prepared to say that I have not paid the full price for the string?"

For a fortnight H.P.B.'s condition fluctuated. By Tuesday, May 5, 1891, her chelas kept a night-and-day watch, giving her a tablespoon of brandy every two hours. As headstrong and difficult as she had been all her life, she insisted on getting dressed on Wednesday; leaning on the arms of her chelas, she struggled to the big chair beside her worktable. With a weary gesture she tried to snub out the cigarette that she could not smoke as she brooded over her papers, holding them in her hands once more, trying to sort them, giving instructions to destroy this and put that in such a place. She tried to "make a patience," but the cards were too heavy for her beautiful, tired hands, and she went on fumbling weakly with her papers. Her breathing had become so difficult that she did not try to lie down again. When the doctor praised her courage, she looked up at him

## INTO THE SILENCE

with a meekness that stabbed the hearts of her chelas, and whispered: "I do my best, Doctor." With difficulty she rolled and handed to him her last cigarette.

For two days and nights she sat in the big chair, propped up with pillows, pitifully alone. The disciples who knelt about her were callow youngsters whom she scarcely knew. The favorite chela, Annie Besant, was beyond her reach in mid-Atlantic. Comrades who could have brought her the reassurance of old memories had all been alienated. Olcott was in Australia, the Countess Wachtmeister in Sweden; the Keightleys were touring the world; most remote of all were the Sinnetts, close by, in London, but totally estranged.

Although she was well aware of the supreme value of any last words she might utter, confirmation that her Mahatmas were supporting her, a last word of affection for her chelas, at the end H.P.B. abandoned all pretense. She who had failed so signally to attain self-control during her life met this final challenge without a murmur, her eyes open, her face composed and thoughtful. Fully conscious, she lingered on until Friday, May 8. In those last hours of exile from her beloved Russia, memory must have carried her back to the Caucasus. Perhaps she felt again the wind in her face as she galloped across the steppes with her Cossack escort, watched the glow of their evening campfires, and felt once more the choking thrill of their wild songs and dances. Her thoughts may have come back to Avenue Road. Through the window the fresh young green of Annie's garden came to meet her dying gaze. This was indeed her tidal wave, a high wall of greenness, shot with sunlight, rolling toward her faster, faster. Nothing could stop it now.



## CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

- 1831 Helena Hahn born at Ekaterinoslav.
- 1848 July, marries General Nicephore Blavatsky.  
October, leaves him.
- 1848-73 Vagabond Years.
- 1850 Constantinople, meets Metrovitch.
- 1858 Paris, meets D. D. Home, Baron Meyendorf.  
December, returns to Russia.
- 1862 Ozoorgetty, buys house.  
Child, Youry, born, probably during spring.
- 1863 Italy with Metrovitch and child.
- 1867 Child dies.
- 1871 Metrovitch drowned.
- 1872 Cairo, Société Spirite.  
Return to Odessa.
- 1873 March, Paris.  
July, New York.
- 1874 October, meets Olcott at Crittenden, Vermont.
- 1875 March, first Tuitit Bey letter to Olcott.  
April, marries Betanelly; July, leaves him.  
September, founds Theosophical Society.
- 1877 September, *Isis Unveiled* published.
- 1878 July, becomes American citizen.  
December, sails for India.
- 1879 September, founds magazine, the *Theosophist*.
- 1880 September, Simla. Spectacular phenomena.  
October, astral postoffice.
- 1882 December, moves to Adyar, Madras.
- 1883 Summer at Ooty with General and Mrs. Morgan.
- 1884 February, visits Europe.  
September, Coulomb letters published.  
December, Hodgson begins investigation for  
*S. P. R. Report*.
- 1885 March, H.P.B. leaves India.  
August, Würzburg; begins *Secret Doctrine*.

### CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

- December, Countess Wachtmeister joins H.P.B.  
*S. P. R. Report* published.
- 1886 February, writes *My Confession* to Solovyoff.  
August, moves to Ostend.  
Subba Row refuses to edit *Secret Doctrine*.
- 1887 The Keightleys take H.P.B. to London.  
H.P.B. founds magazine *Lucifer*, Blavatsky  
Lodge, and the E. S.
- 1888 *Secret Doctrine* published.
- 1889 May, Annie Besant joins Theosophical Society.
- 1890 H.P.B. moves to Mrs. Besant's home on Avenue  
Road, London.
- 1891 May 8, H.P.B. dies.



## APPENDIX A

Statements by Mme Vera Jelihovsky after death of her sister, Mme Blavatsky, discrediting her own earlier memoirs written under domination of or at the dictation of Madame:

"I would not even dare to confirm the accounts taken down from her own words which I used in my booklet, *The Truth about Mme. Blavatsky*, published in 1881. She forgot so much and mixed it up and, as it proved in our conversations later on, she wanted to conceal so much that I prefer not to discuss those years."

And of Sinnett's *Incidents in the Life of Madame Blavatsky*, supervised and censored by Madame: "I don't dare to recommend it to the reader as in it are many untruths, even in the translations from my published stories."—*Russkoye Obozreniye*, November and December 1891.

Re Madame's phenomena and supernatural hierarchy:

". . . it would be better for her and for the Society if they [the phenomena] were less spoken of or not at all; her too ardent friends have rendered her poor service."

Of the Brothers: "I have never seen them . . . these apparitions have always seemed to me doubtful. . . . We her nearest relatives never heard her speak of these enigmatic personages until 1873–74 after she was settled in New York." [This repudiates the 1870 letter to the aunt, Mme Fadeef.]—*La Nouvelle Revue*, September and October 1892, Vol. LXXVIII.

Re accounts of vagabond years:

"Her stories about where she spent those long years are fragmentary and contradictory; it is impossible to get continuity or even a sense of their being true."—*Russkoye Obozreniye*.

Re materialization of spirits of relatives at Eddy farm:

"We were not impressed by these events, I thought them a fable and invented story . . . so shocked me that I wrote her a resentful letter. . . .

[When H.P.B. wrote of founding the T. S.] "and that she was going to write a book about it I was frightened and thought she had really gone crazy. To my despairing appeal to pull herself together, I received an answer convincing me more than ever

## APPENDIXES

that she was almost if not quite unbalanced mentally. I was worried and waited anxiously to hear what might happen next.”—*Russkoye Obozreniye*.

Re New York period when she came under the influence of Dr. Wilder:

“What astonished us most was the profound erudition, the broad knowledge which she suddenly exhibited in her writings. Whence had she derived this varied scholarship of which she had never previously given any sign. When she first talked to us about it, it was of a single Master, but in a very vague way, calling him sometimes The Voice. . . . Recalling her ‘ignorance crasse’ until she was 14, she marvelled, in letters to her aunt, that men like Prof. Wilder, orientalist and archaeologist and many others now consulted her on all sorts of scientific questions, assuring her that she was better informed than they.”—*La Nouvelle Revue*.

## APPENDIX B

*The Letters of H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett*. Letter 60, undated, but written early in 1886:

“I will try to do what I can to enliven the narrative in the *Memoirs*, because I promised I would. . . . Of course as they now stand—those unfortunate *Memoirs* do remind one of a Harlequin’s costume sown out of different patches. This is not *your* fault for you have done the best you could under the circumstances. . . . LYING—brilliant lively fiction would answer better than such bits and snaps from one’s long, miserable, eventful and ever slandered life, as mine was. . . .

“I am repeatedly reminded of the fact, that, as a public character, as a woman who, instead of pursuing her womanly duties, sleeping with her husband, breeding children, wiping their noses, minding her kitchen and consoling herself with matrimonial assistants on the sly and behind her husband’s back, I have chosen a path that has led me to notoriety and fame; and that therefore I had to expect all that befell me.

“Very well, I admit it and agree. But I say at the same time to the world: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I am in your hands and subject and subordinate to the world’s jury *only since I founded the T. S.* Between H. P. Blavatsky from 1875 and H.P.B. from

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

1830 to that date is a veil drawn and you are in no way concerned with what took place behind it, before I appeared as a public character. It was my PRIVATE LIFE holy and sacred, to all but the slanderous and venomous mad-dogs who poke their noses under cover of the night into every family's and every individual's private lives. To those hyenas who will unearth every tomb by night to get at the corpses and devour them, I owe no explanations. If I am prevented by circumstance from killing them, I have to suffer, but no one can expect me to stand on Trafalgar Square and to be taking into my confidence all the city roughs and cabmen that pass. . . .

"Had I even been all they accuse me of; had I had lovers and children by the bushels, who among all that lot is *pure enough to throw at me openly and publicly* the first stone? The higher spheres of Society from Grand Duchesses and Princesses of blood down to their *cameristes*—are all honeycombed with secret sensuality, licentiousness and prostitution. . . . Out of ten women married and unmarried if you find one who is pure—I am ready to proclaim the present world comparatively holy, yet, with very few exceptions, all the women are liars to themselves as to others. Men are all no better than animals and brutes in their lower natures. And it is *they*, such a lot, that I am going to ask to sit in judgement over me . . . by describing certain events in my life in the *Memoirs*. . . . 'Dear ladies and gentlemen, you, who have never failed to sin behind a shut door, you, who are all tainted with the embraces of other women's husbands and other men's wives, you, not one of whom is exempt from the pleasure of keeping a skeleton or two in your family closets—please take my defence.' No sir, I die rather than do it!" (P. 142.)

## APPENDIX C

Mary K. Neff: *Personal Memoirs of H. P. Blavatsky*. 1937. (The author is a Theosophist and was given access to the Adyar archives.)

Re marriage of Mme Blavatsky and Betanelly:

"The marriage took place between March 11th and 22nd; for the Colonel's book . . . was published March 11th. . . ."

## APPENDIXES

### APPENDIX D

Statement in H.P.B.'s Scrapbooks to explain her supernatural mission to the United States and to justify her turning against spiritualism:

#### "IMPORTANT NOTICE

"Yes. I am sorry that I *had* to identify myself during that shameful exposure of the mediums Holmes with the Spiritualists. I had to save the situation, for I was sent from Paris on purpose to America to *prove* the phenomena and their reality and—show the fallacy of the Spiritualistic theories of 'Spirits.' But how could I do it best? I did not want people at large to know that I could *produce the same thing at will*. I had received ORDERS to the contrary, and yet, I had to keep alive the reality, the genuineness and possibility of such phenomena in the hearts of those who from *Materialists* had turned *Spiritualists*; and now, owing to the exposure of several mediums, fell back again, returned to their scepticism. That is why, selecting a few of the faithful, I went to the Holmeses and helped M., and *his powers* brought out the face of John King and Katie King in the astral light, produced the phenomena of materialization and—allowed the Spiritualists at large to believe it was done thro' the mediumship of Mrs. Holmes. She was terribly frightened herself, for she knew that *this once* the apparition was real. Did I do wrong? The world is not prepared to understand the philosophy of Occult Sciences—let them assure themselves first of all that there are beings in an invisible world, whether 'Spirits' of the dead or Elementals; and that there are hidden powers in man which are capable of making a God of him on earth.

"When I am dead and gone people will, perhaps, appreciate my disinterested motives. I have pledged my word to help people on to *Truth* while living and—will keep my word. Let them abuse and revile me. Let some call me a Medium and a Spiritualist, and others an impostor. The day will come when posterity will learn to know me better.

"Oh poor, foolish, credulous, wicked world!

"M. brings orders to form a Society—a secret Society like the Rosicrucian Lodge. He promises help."—Olcott: *Old Diary Leaves*, I, 13.

# PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

## APPENDIX E

Mme Blavatsky's pseudo-confession in the *New York World*, May 6, 1877:

To the Editor of *The World*:

Sir,—Since the first month of my arrival in America I began, for reasons mysterious but perhaps intelligible, to provoke hatred among those who pretend to be on good terms with me, if not the best of friends. Slanderous reports, vile insinuations, innuendo, have rained about me. For more than three years I have kept silent, although the least of the offences attributed to me was calculated to excite the loathing of a person of my disposition. I have rid myself of a number of these retailers of slander, but finding that I was actually suffering in the estimation of friends whose good opinion I valued, I adopted a policy of seclusion.

For two years my world has been in my apartments, and for an average of at least seventeen hours a day I have sat at my desk with my books and manuscripts as my companions. During this time many highly valued acquaintances have been formed with ladies and gentlemen who have sought me out without expecting me to return their visits. I am an old woman, and I feel the need of fresh air as well as any one, but my disgust for the lying, slanderous world that we find outside of "heathen" countries has been such that in seven months I believe I have been out but three times.

But no retreat is secure against the anonymous slanderer who uses the United States mail. Letters have been received by my trusted friends containing the foulest aspersions upon myself. At various times I have been charged with (1) drunkenness; (2) forgery; (3) being a Russian spy; (4) with being an anti-Russian spy; (5) with being no Russian at all, but a French adventuress; (6) of having been in jail for theft; (7) of being the mistress of a Polish count in Union Square; (8) with murdering seven husbands; (9) with bigamy; (10) of being the mistress of Colonel Olcott; (11) also of an acrobat. Other things might be mentioned but decency forbids.

Since the arrival of Wong Chin Foo the game has recommenced with double activity. I have received anonymous letters and others and newspaper slips, telling infamous stories about

## APPENDIXES

him; on his part, he has received communications about us, one of which I beg to insert.

May 4th.

Does the disciple of Buddha know the character of the people with whom he is at present residing? The surroundings of a teacher of morality and religion should be moral. Are his so? On the contrary, they are people of very doubtful reputation, as he can ascertain by applying at the nearest police station. A FRIEND.

. . . I invite everyone possessed of such proofs as will vindicate them in a court of justice to publish them over their own signatures in the newspapers. I will furnish to everyone a list of my several residences, and contribute toward paying detectives to trace my every step. But I hereby give notice that if any more unverifiable slanders can be traced to responsible sources I will invoke the protection of the law, which, on the theory of your national Constitution, was made for heathen as well as Christian denizens. And I further notify slanderers of a speculative turn that no blackmail is paid at No. 392 West Forty-seventh Street.

Respectfully,

H. P. BLAVATSKY.

May 5th, 1877.

## APPENDIX F

Statement by Major Henderson, Chief of the India Police, in the *Times of India*, quoted in *Report* of the Society for Psychological Research, p. 266.

"On the day in question, I declared the saucer to be an incomplete and unsatisfactory manifestation, as not fulfilling proper test conditions. My reasonable doubt was construed as a personal insult, and I soon discovered that a sceptical frame of mind in the inquirer is not favorable to the manifestation of the marvels of Theosophy. . . . I am not a Theosophist nor a believer in the phenomenon, which I entirely discredit."

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

### APPENDIX G

*Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett.* Quotations from supposed writings of Mahatmas illustrating H.P.B.'s methods of establishing their reality, and supporting her policies.

#### Developing Personality of Mahatmas:

The austere Master Morya thanks Sinnett for the gift of a pipe, which had been forwarded by H.P.B.: "Very kind of Sinnett Sahib—many thanks and salams [*sic*] for the tobacco machine—the pipe is short and my nose long, so we will agree very well together, I hope. Yours always, M." (P. 374.)

October 1882. Master K. H. was staying near Pari Jong at *gun-pa* of friend, busy with important affairs. Received Sinnett's last letter as he was crossing large inner courtyard of monastery, listening to the Lama Tondhub Gyatcho; tried to slip letter into travelling bag hanging from his shoulder, but it dropped unnoticed to the ground: "my attention being wholly absorbed with the conversation, I had already reached the staircase leading to the library door when I heard the voice of a young *gyloong* calling out from a window. . . . Turning round I saw a venerable old goat in the act of making a morning meal of it [the letter]. The creature had already devoured part of C. C. M's letter, and was thoughtfully preparing to have a bite at yours, more delicate and easy for chewing with his old tooth than the tough envelope and paper of your correspondent's epistle. . . . The envelope with your crest on had nearly disappeared, the contents of the letters made illegible." K. H. was embarrassed, could not miraculously restore the letter because of red tape restrictions. Just then he saw the Maha Chohan's "holy face before me, with his eye twinkling in quite an unusual manner, and heard his voice: 'Why break the rule? I will do it myself.' . . . He has restored the missing parts and done it quite neatly too, as you see, and even transformed a crumpled, broken envelope, very much damaged, into a new one—crest and all. . . . I thanked the goat heartily . . . and to show my gratitude I strengthened what remained of teeth in his mouth, and set the dilapidated remains firmly in their sockets, so that he may chew food harder than English letters for several years to come." (Pp. 320–1.)

K. H. to Sinnett: "You my good friend whom I had once or

## APPENDIXES

twice the pleasure of hearing playing on your piano in the quiet intervals between dress-coating and a beef-and-claret dinner—tell me, could you favour me as readily, as with one of your easy *waltzes*—with one of Beethoven's Grand Sonatas? Pray have patience." (P. 115.)

Confidential to Sinnett; going over the head of H.P.B.

Master M. to Sinnett, transmitted by Damodar: "The Old Woman? Of course she will be *frantic*—but who cares? It's kept from her, however, secret. No use making her more miserable than what she is." (P. 271.) K. H. to Sinnett (about February 1883): "Do not listen to the old woman—she becomes weak-minded when left to herself. But M. will take her in hand. Yours, K. H. (P. 440.) *Contemptuous of all women*; K. H. to Sinnett, August 23, 1882, (marked "Private and Confidential"): "Generally I never trust a woman any more than I would an echo; both are of the female gender because the goddess Echo, like woman . . . will always have the last word. . . . Beware of poor Mrs. Gordon. An excellent lady, but would talk Death herself to death." (P. 302.) "Women do lack the power of concentration." (P. 36.) "Verily woman is a dreadful calamity." (P. 421.) "The book [*Occult World* by Sinnett] is out, and we have to patiently wait for the results of that *first serious shot* at the enemy. *Art Magic* [by Mrs. Britten] and *Isis* [by H.P.B.] emanating from women . . . could never hope for a serious hearing." (P. 50.)

Complex Attitude of Mahatmas' toward H.P.B.

*Disparagement*: "Our old lady is weak and her nerves are worked to a fiddle string; so is her jaded brain. . . . Another fine example of the habitual disorder in which Mrs. H.P.B.'s mental furniture is kept. As in her writing room, confusion is ten times confounded, so in her mind are crowded ideas piled in such a chaos that when she wants to express them the tail peeps out before the head. . . . H.P.B. is a fanatic in her way, and is unable to write with anything like system and calmness." (Pp. 39, 105, 129.)

*Justification*: "I am painfully aware of the fact that the habitual incoherence of her statements—especially when excited—and her strange ways make her in your opinion a very undesirable transmitter of our messages. Nevertheless, kind Brothers, once that you have learned the truth; once told, that this unbalanced mind, the seeming incongruity of her speeches and ideas,



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

her nervous excitement, all that in short, which is so calculated to upset the feelings of sober minded people, whose notions of reserve and manners are shocked by such strange outbursts of what they regard as her temper, and which so revolt you,—once that *you know* that nothing of it is due to any fault of hers you may, perchance, be led to regard her in quite a different light. Notwithstanding that the time is not quite ripe to let you entirely into the secret . . . I am empowered to allow you a glimpse behind the veil. This state of hers is intimately connected with her occult training in Tibet. . . . Try to believe more in the old lady. She does rave betimes; but she is truthful and does the best she can for you." Master K. H., Simla, autumn 1881. (P. 203.) "The Old Woman is accused of *untruthfulness, inaccuracy*. . . . She is *forbidden* to say what she knows. You may cut her to pieces and she will not tell. Nay—she is ordered in *cases of need* to *mislead people*. She is too *truthful*, too *outspoken*, too incapable of *dissimulation* and now she is being daily crucified for it." Master M., March 3, 1882. (P. 272.) "The right is on her side. Your accusations are extremely unjust. . . . If you still maintain the same attitude—I shall have to . . . wish you with all my heart better success with more worthy teachers. She certainly lacks charity, but indeed, you lack discrimination. Regretfully yours, K. H." (P. 375.) "Remember what I said to you some two years ago 'were H.P.B. to die before we found a substitute' the powers through which we work in our communications with the outside world may permit the transmission of two or three letters more, then it would die out and you would have no more letters from me. Well—she is virtually dead; and it is yourself—pardon me this one more truth—who have killed the rude but faithful agent, one moreover who was really devoted to you personally. . . . Verily *our* ways are not *your* ways, hence there remains but little hope for us in the West." Master K. H., October 1884. (P. 368.)

*Estimate of H.P.B. by Master K. H.* "Do you want to know how far she is guilty? . . . [Her only] real, *deliberate* deception [was] when in the presence of phenomena produced, she kept constantly denying . . . that she had anything to do with their production *personally*. From your 'European standpoint' it is downright deception, a big thundering *lie*; from our *Asiatic* standpoint, though an imprudent, blamable zeal, an untruthful exaggeration . . . yet withal, if we look into the motive—a sublime, self-denying, noble and meritorious—not dishonest—zeal. Yes; in that and in that alone she became constantly guilty of

## APPENDIXES

*deceiving* her friends. She could never be made to realize . . . in attributing to us phenomena of the most childish nature, she but lowered us in the public estimation and sanctioned the claim of her enemies that she was 'but a medium!' She can and did produce phenomena . . . sometimes better, more wonderful and far more perfect than those of some high initiated chelas. . . . We cannot help feeling at times angry with, oftener laughing at her . . . this ridiculous effusion is too ardent, too sincere and true not to be respected. . . . I do not believe I was ever so profoundly touched by anything I witnessed in all my life, as I was with the poor old creature's ecstatic rapture when meeting us recently both in our natural bodies [after several years' absence]. Even our phlegmatic M. was thrown off his balance by such an exhibition—of which he was chief hero. He had to use his *power*, and plunge her into a profound sleep, otherwise she would have burst some blood vessel including kidneys, liver and her 'interiors' . . . in her delirious attempts to flatten her nose against his riding mantle besmeared with the Sikkim mud. We both laughed; yet could we feel otherwise than touched? Of course she is utterly unfit for a *true adept*: her nature is too passionately affectionate and we have no right to indulge in personal attachments." October 1882. (Pp. 311-14.)

### Explaining Mistakes

K. H. re Swami Dayanand, October 1882: "If *my* word of honour has any weight with you, then know that D. Swami *was* an initiated Yogi, a very high chela at Badrinath, endowed some years back with great powers and a knowledge he has since forfeited. . . . And now see what has become of this truly great man . . . a moral wreck, ruined by his ambition." (P. 309.)

The following passages appeared in the summer of 1884 when a crash was imminent: "We are not infallible, all-forseeing Mahatmas at every hour of the day, good friends; none of you have even learned to remember so much. . . . You do not find certain recent letters and notes of mine 'philosophical' and in my usual style. It could scarcely be helped. . . . You have too much intelligence not to see clearly, as the Americans would say—the fix *I am in*, and that I personally can do very little." (Pp. 364, 370.)

### Concerning Truth

Reply by K. H. to Hume's warning against Fern, August 1882: "Our eastern ideas about 'motives,' 'truthfulness,' and 'honesty'

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

differ considerably from your ideas in the West . . . your civilized Western Society, Church, and State, politics and commerce have come to assume a virtue that it is quite impossible for either a man of education, a statesman, a trader, or anyone else living in the world—to practice in an unrestricted sense. . . . What would you think of a gentleman or lady . . . who in meeting you would tell you plainly and abruptly what he thinks of you? . . . *All is lie, all falsehood*, around and in us, my brother. . . . “Thou shalt in lying, stealing, killing, etc. *avoid being detected*”—seems to be the chief commandment of the Lord gods of civilization—Society and Public Opinion.” (Pp. 232-3.)

## APPENDIX H

Paris, 1st April, 1884

46 Rue Notre Dame des Champs.

*My dear Monsieur and Madame Coulomb:*

I address this letter to you both, because I think it well that you should lay your heads together and think seriously about it. . . . I will first transcribe certain passages from several letters which I have just received from Adyar. I will not dwell upon what is there said respecting Madame Coulomb . . . who “tries her best to undermine the power of the Society by talking . . . against it.” Mr. Lane-Fox says in his letter, “She opposes *everything* that is intended for the benefit of the Society. But these are perhaps trifling things which might be counteracted. More serious is the fact that she says she lent you money in Egypt.” (That I have never hidden. I have told it to everybody; and at the time of the Wimbridge-Bates tragedy, I announced publicly that I was under obligation to you, since, when no one would aid me—me a stranger in Cairo—you alone and M. Coulomb helped me, gave me hospitality, loans of money, etc.; I have always said *more even than you really did.*) Well, I continue my copying—“she says the money was never repaid; that M. Coulomb *has been constructing secret trap-doors for the producing of occult phenomena*, that she could tell—the Lord knows what—if she wanted to; and lastly, her foolish assertion that the Theosophical Society was founded to overthrow British rule in India. . . .”

Oh, Madame Coulomb! what then have I done to you, that you should try to ruin me in this way? Is it because for four years we lived together, helping each other to meet the troubles of

## APPENDIXES

life, and because I have left everything in the house in your hands, saying to you continually, "Take what money you need" that you seek to ruin me for life . . . ?

They [the Adyar correspondents] add: "Furthermore, we have sufficient evidence *through herself*, that she is made use of by black magicians, not only to interfere with the welfare of the Society, but especially to exert a poisonous and detrimental influence on Damodar. . . ."

Why does she hate me? What have I done to her? I know that I am bad-tempered, violent, that without intending it I have perhaps offended her more than once. But what evil have I ever done to her? Since our arrival at Adyar I have truly and sincerely loved her, and since my departure I have thought only of buying her something at Paris which she needed, and of how I could put you in the possession of 2,000 or 3,000 R[upee]s in order that she might go and reside for the summer at Ootacamund, or settle elsewhere and keep a boarding-house, or indeed do anything for herself and you. . . .

For see again what that poor boy Damodar says, who has written a despairing letter. . . . "I am between the horns of a dilemma. . . . Master tells me that Mme. Coulomb must be treated with consideration and respect and, on the other hand, she tells me and has been saying to everyone *that you are a fraud*—performing phenomena by means of secret spring trap doors. . . ."

Well now, what do you say to all that? *What end* do you expect to gain Mme. Coulomb, by allowing people to believe of you *that which you are incapable of doing*, i.e. of [employing] black magic against a Society which protects you, which works for you, if you have worked for it (and God knows the obligations which we owe entirely to you M. Coulomb, for all that you have done for us since we came to Adyar). That you have worked for us I say aloud, and that working, you have a right to our gratitude, and to your clothing and food, and to live at the cost of the Society as far as its funds allow—I say it again. But what purpose have you in going and vilifying me secretly to those who love me and believe in me? What vengeance have you against me? What have I done to you, I ask again? . . .

Ah well, *à là grace de Dieu*. Accuse me, denounce me, ruin H. P. Blavatsky who has never hated or betrayed you, who almost ruined the Society . . . in order to sustain and protect you in opposition to all—even the Colonel; and that when she

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

was not able to do it without danger to herself. But remember, you who speak so much of God and of Christ, that if there be a God, He will assuredly not reward you for the evil which you try to do to those who have never done anything to you. . . . I have even asked that they should nominate M. Coulomb as one of the trustees, so much do I need him to build a room.

. . . May *I perish*, but may the cause flourish! If you compromise me . . . I shall never return to Adyar, but will remain here or in London, where I will prove by phenomena more marvellous still that they are true and that our Mahatmas exist, *for there is one here at Paris, and there will also be in London*. . . . Why do you wish to make the Colonel hate you, and set him against you as you have put *all* at Adyar against you? Why not quietly remain friends and wait for better days, helping us to put the Society on a firm basis, having large funds, of which all theosophists who have need of protection and help in money would reap the benefit? Why not accept the 2,000 Rs. which Mr. Lane-Fox offered you, and spend the hot months at Ooty, and the cool months with us, as in the past? . . .

Come, I have no ill-will against you. I am so much accustomed to terror and suffering that nothing astonishes me. But what truly astonishes me is to see you, who are such an intelligent woman, doing evil for its own sake, and running the risk of being swallowed up in the pit which you have digged—yourself the first victim. . . . Undo then the evil which you have unwittingly done. I am sure of this—[you are] carried away by your nerves, your sickness, your sufferings. . . . But if you choose to go on disgracing me for no good to yourself—do it; *and may your Christ and God repay you!*

After all, I sign myself with anguish of heart which you can never comprehend—

for ever your friend,

H. P. Blavatsky

Mme E. Coulomb: *Some Account of My Intercourse*

*with Madame Blavatsky*

## APPENDIX I

Letter from Master K. H. to Damodar, March 1884, presumably written by Damodar. Quoted in *Report of the Society for Psychical Research*, p. 278.

## APPENDIXES

"So long as one has not developed a perfect sense of justice, he should prefer to err rather on the side of mercy than commit the slightest act of injustice. Madame Coulomb is a medium, and as such irresponsible for many things she may say or do. At the same time, she is kind and charitable. One must know how to act toward her to make her a very good friend. She has her own weaknesses, but their bad effects can be minimized by exercising on her mind a moral influence by a friendly and kindly feeling. Her mediumistic nature is a help in this direction, if proper advantage be taken of the same.

"It is my wish, therefore, that she shall continue in charge of the household business, the Board of Control of course exercising a proper supervisory control, and seeing, in consultation with her, that no unnecessary expenditure is incurred. A good deal of reform is necessary, and can be made rather with the help than the antagonism of Mme. Coulomb. Damodar will have told you this, but his mind was purposely obscured, without his knowledge to test your intentions. Show this to Mme. Coulomb so that she may cooperate with you.

K. H."

## APPENDIX J

Letters from Mme Blavatsky giving instructions to M. and Mme Coulomb for production of phenomena, published in *Christian College Magazine*, Madras, 1883:

*Dear Marquis* [M. Coulomb]—I leave the fate of *my children* [occult letters inclosed] in your hands. Take care of them and make them work miracles. Perhaps it would be better to make this one fall on his head? H.P.B.

*Seal* the child after *reading it*. Register your letters if there is anything within—otherwise, never mind. [Translated from the French]

*Dear M. Coulomb*, This is what I think you ought to have. Try if you think it is going to be a success to have a larger audience than our *domestic imbeciles* only. It is well worth the trouble, for the Adyar saucer [pintray] might become historical like the Simla cup. . . . My Salaams and thanks to you. H.P.B.

. . . You need not wait for the man "Punch" [Ragoonath Rao]. Provided the thing takes place in the presence of respect-

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

able persons *besides* our own familiar muffs. I beg you to do it at the first opportunity.

Poona, Mercredi. [October 1883]

*Ma Chère Marquise* [Mme Coulomb],—Holkar—fiasco. Tant mieux, il m'envoie 200 rupees pour mes dépenses; aura eu peur de quelque sacré official bigot. Damn him.

[The Maharajah Holkar ruled the province of Indore which was a center of rebellion against the British during the Mutiny. He evidently failed to produce the generous contribution anticipated, but at least, he gave Madame Rs. 200 for her expenses.]

[To Mme Coulomb]: Now dear, let us change the programme. . . . Jacob Sassoon, the happy proprietor of a crore of rupees, with whose family I dined last night, 'is anxious to become a Theosophist. He is ready to give 10,000 rupees to buy and repair the headquarters, he said to Colonel . . . if only he saw a little phenomenon, got the assurance that the *Mahatmas* could hear what was said, or gave him some other sign of their existence (? ! !). . . . Will you go up to the shrine and ask K. H. to send me a telegram that would reach me about four or five in the afternoon, same day, worded thus:

"Your conversation with Mr. Jacob Sassoon reached Master just now. Were the latter even to satisfy him, still the doubter would hardly find the moral courage to connect himself with the society. Ramalinga Deb."

If this reaches me on the 26th, even in the evening, it will still produce a tremendous impression. Address care of N. Kandallawala, Judge, POONA. JE FERAI LE RESTE, Cela coutera quatre or cinq roupies. *Cela ne fait rien*. [It will cost 4 or 5 rupees. *That is nothing*.]

H.P.B.

## APPENDIX K

*The Letters of H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett*. Comments on the entanglement of her chela Mohini with Miss L. and others in Paris:

*Ludwig Strasse 6, Würzburg, Oct. 9th, 1885*

*My dearest Mrs. Sinnett:*

. . . Speak of the *inner* Circle of the *Oriental* Group! The Roman group it ought to be called with all those Messalines in it.

## APPENDIXES

. . . If Sodom was justly punished, then so would the Oriental group be . . . *my heart has changed into a pillar* of ice, cold marble with horror. . . . But know one thing: the Anglo-French messaline who, inveigling Mohini into the Barbyan wood, suddenly, and seeing that her overtures *in words* were left without effect—slipped down her loose garment to the waist leaving her entirely *nude* before the boy—is not the worse one in the *Oriental* group. Of all those *pure* “Vestals” she is only the most *frankly* dissolute, but not either the most lustful or sinful. There are others in the group, and not one but *four in number* who burn with a scandalous, ferocious passion for Mohini. . . . Oh the filthy beasts!! the sacrilegious, hypocritical harlots! . . . And let not Mr. Sinnett or yourself say “nonsense” to this. I have all the proofs in hand; letters, notes and even *confessions*, AUTOGRAPH CONFESSIONS to little D. N. [Dharbagiri Nath, an alias used by Babaji]. . . . One of these days one or the other of the London Potiphars shall turn round in her fury and act like Mrs. Potiphar of the Pharaohs, shall father her own iniquities upon Mohini and—ruin the Society and his reputation. D. N. got from him all these epistles to keep. . . . (Pp. 123–4.)

*February 16th, 1886*

*My dear Mr. Sinnett,*

. . . I was mad to think that any woman would dare write to Mohini such letters and saw plainly that he was guilty . . . of yielding to an adoration that tickled his vanity, of corresponding with a woman in love with him. And *you know that had I even believed in my heart that he was guilty*, I would screen him, *a chela*, one connected with the Masters—with my own body, not for his *own sake* for I would have done everything *secretly and underhand* to rid the Society of such a hypocritical monster—but I would have cut off my tongue before saying or confessing it to anyone. It would have been suicidal for the Society, myself, and thrown a new slur on the Masters. . . .

. . . I do not believe Mohini *guilty*—never did of the consummation of the last criminal act. But if he has indeed written letters to Miss — “nearly 100 in number” and “couched in the most extraordinary terms,” I will retract the words “Potiphar” and other “libellous” terms and write to her through her lawyers. . . . (Pp. 184–5.)



## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

### APPENDIX L

To Vsevolod Sergyeevich Solovyoff: *A Modern Priestess of Isis*. "My Confession" [undated, but written February 1886],

I have made up my mind [doubly underlined]. Has the following picture ever presented itself to your literary imagination? There is living in the forest a wild boar—an ugly creature but doing no harm to anyone. . . . There is let loose upon him, without rhyme or reason, a pack of ferocious hounds; men chase him from the wood, threaten to burn his native forest . . . though he is no coward by nature, he flies for a while before these hounds; he tries to escape *for the sake of the forest*, lest they burn it down! . . .

Worn out, the boar sees that his forest is already set on fire and that he cannot save it nor himself. What is there for the boar to do? Why this; he stops, he turns his face to the furious pack of hounds and beasts, and shows himself *wholly* as he is from top to bottom, and then falls upon his enemies in his turn, and kills as many of them as his strength serves till he falls dead. . . .

Believe me, *I have fallen because I have made up my mind to fall*, or else to bring about a reaction by telling all God's truth about myself, *but without mercy on my enemies*. . . . I will fly no more. . . . A Frenchman is ready, and a well-known journalist too, delighted to set about the work and to write at my dictation something short, but strong, and what is most important—a true history of my life. *I shall not even attempt to defend to justify myself*. In this book I shall simply say:

In 1848, I, hating my husband, N. V. Blavatsky (it may have been wrong, but still such was the nature *God* gave me) left him, abandoned him—a *virgin* (I shall produce documents and letters proving this, although he himself is not such a swine as to deny it). I loved one man deeply but still more I loved occult science, believing in magic, wizards, etc. I wandered with him here and there, in Asia, in America and in Europe. I met with So-and-so. (You may call him a *wizard*, what does it matter to him?) In 1858 I was in London; there came out some story about a child, not mine (there will follow medical evidence from the faculty of Paris, and it is for this that I am going to Paris).

One thing and another was said of me; that I was deprived,

## APPENDIXES

possessed with a devil, etc. I shall tell everything as I think fit, everything I did for the twenty years and more that I laughed at the *qu'en dira-t-on* [what will they say] and covered up all traces of what I was *really* occupied in, i.e., the *sciences occultes* for the sake of my family and relations who would at that time have cursed me.

I will tell how from my 18th year I tried to get people to talk about me, and say about me that this man and that was my lover, and *hundreds* of them. I will tell too a great deal of which no one ever dreamed, and *I will prove it*. Then I will inform the world how suddenly my eyes were opened to all the horror of my *moral suicide*; how I was sent to America to try my psychological capabilities. How I collected a society there and began to expiate my faults, and attempted to make men better and to sacrifice myself for their regeneration.

*I will name all* the theosophists who were brought into the right way, drunkards and rakes, who became almost saints, especially in India, and those who enlisted as theosophists, and continued their former life (and there are many of them) and *yet were the first* to join the pack of hounds that were hunting me down, and to bite me. I will describe many Russians, great, and small—Madame S— among them, *her* slander and how it turned out to be a lie and a calumny.

I shall not spare myself, I swear I will not spare; *I myself will set fire* to the four quarters of my native wood; the society to wit, and I will perish, but I will perish *with a huge following*.

God grant I shall die, shall perish at once on publication; but if not, if the master would not allow it, how should I fear anything? Am I a criminal before the law? Have I killed anyone, destroyed, defamed? I am an American foreigner, and I must not go back to Russia.

From Blavatsky, if he is alive, what have I to fear? It is 38 years since I parted from him, after that I passed three days and a half with him in Tiflis in 1863, and then we parted again. Or M—? [Baron Meyendorff?] I do not care a straw about that egoist and hypocrite! He betrayed me, destroyed me by telling *lies* to the medium Home, who has been disgracing me for ten years already, so much the worse for him.

You understand it is for the sake of the society I have valued my reputation these ten years. *I trembled* lest rumours founded on *my own efforts* (a splendid case for the *psychologists*, for Richet and Co.) and magnified a hundred times, might throw

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

discredit on the society while blackening me. I was ready to go on my knees to those who helped me to cast a veil over my past; to give my life and all my powers to those who helped me. But now?

Will you, or Home the medium, or M—, or anyone in the world, frighten me with threats when I have myself resolved on a full confession? Absurd! I tortured and killed myself with fear and terror that I should damage the society—kill it. But now I torture myself no more. I have thought it all out, coolly and sanely, I have risked all on a single card—*all!* I will snatch the weapon from my enemies' hands and write a book which will make a noise through all Europe and Asia and bring in immense sums of money to support my orphan niece, an innocent child, my brother's orphan.

Even if all the filth, all the scandal and lies against me had been the holy truth, still I should have been no worse than hundreds of princesses, countesses, court ladies and royalties, than Queen Isabella herself, who have given themselves, even *sold* themselves to the entire male sex, from nobles to *coachmen and waiters inclusive*; what can they say of me worse than that? *And all this I myself will say and sign.*

No! The devils will save me in this last great hour. You did not calculate on the cool determination of *despair* which *was* and has *passed over*. . . . I will even take to lies, to the greatest of lies, which for that reason is the most likely of all to be believed. I will say and publish it in the *Times* and in all the papers, that the "master" and "Mahatma K. H." are only the product of my own imagination; that I *invented* them, that the phenomena were all more or less *spiritualistic* apparitions, and I shall have 20 million *spiritists* in a body at my back.

I will say that in certain instances I *fooled* people; I will expose dozens of *fools*, *des hallucinés*; I will say that I was making trial for my own satisfaction, for the sake of experiment. And to this I have been brought by *you*. You have been the last straw which has broken the camel's back under its intolerably heavy burden.

Now you are at liberty to conceal nothing. Repeat to all Paris what you have ever heard or know about me. I have already written a letter to Sinnett *forbidding him* to publish my *memoirs* at his own discretion. I myself will publish them with all the truth. So there will be the "*truth* about H. P. Blavatsky" in which psychology and *her own and others'* immorality and Rome and



*Her fighting days were over*



*H.P.B. in her perambulator, attended by James M. Pryse (left) and G. R. S. Mead (right)*

## APPENDIXES

politics and all *her own* and *others'* filth once more will be set out to God's world. I shall conceal nothing.

It will be a Saturnalia of the moral depravity of mankind, this *confession* of mine, a worthy epilogue of my stormy life. And it will be a treasure for science as well as for scandal: and it is all me, *me*; I will show myself with a *reality* which will break many and will resound through the world. Let the psychist gentlemen, and whosoever will set on foot a new inquiry. Mohini and all the rest, even India, are dead for me. I thirst for one thing only, that the world may know all the reality, all the truth, and learn the lesson. And then *death*, kindest of all.

H. BLAVATSKY.

You may print this letter if you will, even in Russia. It is all the same now.

## APPENDIX M

William Emmette Coleman: "The Sources of Madame Blavatsky's Writings." Appendix C in Solovyoff's *A Modern Priestess of Isis*:

In *Isis Unveiled*, published in 1877, I discovered some 2,000 passages copied from other books without proper credit. By careful analysis I found that in compiling *Isis* about 100 books were used. About 1400 books are quoted from. . . . There are in *Isis* about 2100 quotations from and references to books that were copied at second-hand . . . only about 140 are credited to the books from which Madame Blavatsky copied them at second-hand. The others are quoted in such a manner as to lead the reader to think that Madame Blavatsky had read and utilized the original works. . . . The books utilized were nearly all current nineteenth-century literature. . . .

Here follows a list of some of the more extensive plagiarisms in *Isis* . . . and the number of passages that were plagiarized:

Ennemoser's History of Magic, English translation	107 passages
Demonologia	85
Dunlap's Sod; the Son of the Man	134
"    "    the Mysteries of Adoni	65
"    Spirit History of Man	77
Salverte's Philosophy of Magic, English translation	68

## PRIESTESS OF THE OCCULT

Des Mousseaux's Magie au Dix-neuvième Siècle	63 passages
“ Hauts Phénomènes de la Magie	45
“ Mœurs et Pratiques des Démons	16
Supernatural Religion	40
King's Gnostics, 1st edition	42
Mackenzie's Masonic Cyclopedia	36
Jaccoliot's Christna et le Christ	23
“ Bible in India, English translation	17
“ Le Spiritisme dans le Monde	19
Hone's Apocryphal New Testament	27
Cory's Ancient Fragments	20
Howitt's History of the Supernatural	20

The *Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888, is of a piece with *Isis*. It is permeated with plagiarisms, and is in all its parts a rehash of other books. A specimen of the wholesale plagiarisms . . . vol. 2, pp. 599–603. Nearly the whole of four pages was copied from Oliver's *Pythagorean Triangle*, while only a few lines were credited to that work.

The *Book of Dzyan* was the work of Madame Blavatsky. . . . I find in this “oldest book in the world” statements copied from nineteenth-century books, and in the usual blundering manner of Madame Blavatsky.

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# INDEX

- Adhemar, Count and Countess d',  
225, 265-6
- African sorcerers, 118
- Aksakov, Hon. A. N., 64-7, 70, 82-  
3, 91, 114, 116, 123, 238, 278
- Alice in Wonderland, 163
- Allahabad Pioneer, 144, 192-3
- American Bookseller, 116
- Arabs, shipwrecked, 117-18
- Archbishop of Canterbury, wife of,  
11
- Arnold, Sir Edwin, 156, 220
- Arundale, Francesca, 220, 226-8,  
260-1, 281
- Arya Samaj, 125-6, 132, 134, 136,  
140, 142, 145, 156, 255
- Astor, John Jacob, 121
- astral postoffice, 152-3, 162-3, 167
- Atlantic Monthly*, 75
- Babaji D. Nath, also known as:  
Bowaji, Gwala K. Deb, Dharbar-  
giri Nath, M. Krishnamachari,  
etc., 255-6, 258, 262-4, 267,  
271-3, 333
- Babula, 137, 145, 149, 158, 162,  
198, 202, 213, 215, 220, 230,  
235, 246, 256
- Baburao, 137
- Back-to-Blavatsky campaign, 13-14
- Bagratioti, Countess, 27, 30
- Balfour, Arthur, 238
- Ballard, Anna, 57-8
- Banner of Light*, 188-9
- Barnum, P. T., 10
- Bates, Rosa, 127, 129, 140, 148,  
155-6, 328
- Beard, Dr. George M., 71-2
- Beecher, Rev. Henry Ward, 114
- Belinsky, Russian critic, 18
- Bell, Alexander Graham, 237
- Benares, Maharajah of, 146, 159
- Beresford, J. D., 12
- Besant, Annie, 11-13, 27, 42, 131,  
180, 264, 275, 284, 293, 303-10,  
312, 315
- Betanelly, Michael, 68-70, 76, 78,  
80-2, 84, 90-3, 95, 96, 98, 99,  
127
- Bhagavad-Gita, 295
- Bhavani Shankar, 255
- Bhawani Row, 184
- Billing, Mrs. Mary Hollis, 131-3,  
139, 187-8
- Bishen-lal, 191
- Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna: birth,  
15; childhood, 16-24; marriage,  
24-5; conflicting accounts, 26-  
30; Rawson's story, 34-6; Count  
Witte's story, 37-40, 50-2; affair  
with Metrovitch, 41-5; birth and  
death of Youry, 45-8; death of  
Metrovitch, 52; Cairo and Société  
Spirite, 52-5; struggles in New  
York, 56-62; meets Olcott, 3-7,  
62-4; Philadelphia, the Holmeses  
and General Lippitt, 75-9; mar-  
ries Betanelly, 80-2, 320; creates  
Egyptian Brotherhood, 82-8;  
leaves Betanelly, 93; Boston and  
New York with Olcott, 94-9;  
founds Theosophical Society,  
100-3; visits Prof Corson, 104-5;  
establishes Lamasery, 105-7;  
meets Wilder, Baron de Palm,  
and writes *Isis Unveiled*, 108-21;  
becomes American citizen, 127;  
moves to India, 124-33; stop-over  
in London, 131-3; founds *The  
Theosophist*, 141; Simla phenom-  
ena, 149-53; Russian spy charges,  
122, 126-7, 144, 148, 192, 247-  
8, 259, 278, 301, 322; astral post-  
office, 152-3, 162-3, 167, 210;  
second summer in Simla, 167-73;  
meets Subba Row and moves to



## INDEX

### Blavatsky (Continued)

Adyar, 174-82; Eglinton and K. H. letters, 183-5; Swami Dayanand, pursuit of, and repudiation by, 136-8, 145-6, 185-6; Massey-Ski incident, 186-8; Kiddle charges, 188-90; Phoenix venture, 192-7; Darjeeling, 198-200; sets up Shrine, 201-3; Ooty and phenomena for General Morgan, 203-5; social triumph in Europe, 213-21; Coulomb letters, 222-6, 230-3, 328-32; Laura Holloway and alienation of Sinnett, 226-30; S P R. report, 234-57; leaves India, 256; Wurzburg with Countess Wachtmeister, 264-82, writing of *Secret Doctrine*, 267-9, 284-5, 287-96, Solovyoff and *My Confession*, 278-9, 334-7, Ostend, 280-6, Keightleys take her to England, 287; founds Blavatsky Lodge, magazine *Lucifer*, Theosophical Publishing Society, and the E. S., 291-9; Dr. Coues and *New York Sun*, 300-3, Annie Besant takes charge, 303-10; reconciled to Russian Church, 312-13; death, 311-15; White Lotus day, 6

appearance, 59, 72-3, 216, 263, 308, 310; achievements, 11-12, 114-15, 138-9, 210-11; basic quest, 130, 137, 174-8, 211, 292-3; characteristics, 6-7, 11, 14, 23, 157, 197, 216, 288-9; confederates, use of, 70, 79, 137, 155, 172-3, 174, 176, 185-8, 203, 246, 259, 269, 271; confessions, series of, 65-7, 121-2, 209-13, 278-80, 322, 334-7; drugs, use of, 36, 60; illnesses and neurotic tendencies, 16, 18-19, 23-4, 45-6, 48, 59, 90-1, 126, 198, 251-2, 256, 311-12; Mahatmas' comments on, 325-8;

### Blavatsky (Continued)

source material and use of apocryphal documents, 14, 54, 57-8, 89, 275-6, 321; supernormal powers, 239-41; three divisions of life, 7

writings: *Isis Unveiled*, 28, 106-16, 117, 121, 124, 180, 186, 284, 291-2, 294-5, 313, 337-8, *Secret Doctrine*, 267-8, 282, 284-5, 287-310, 338; *Voice of the Silence*, 309; *My Books*, 313; see also bibliography, 339

Blavatsky, General Nicephore, 7, 24-5, 27, 37, 40-1, 44, 81, 277, 334-5

Bohme, Jakob, 8

Boleyn, Anne, 218

Bombay Gazette, 151

Bouton, J W, 109-12

Bradlaugh, Charles, 305

Brahmanism, 115, 294

Britten, Emma H., 102-4, 106, 111

Brotherhood of Luxor, 84-7, 92-7, 104, 107, 126, 133, 163

Brothers N., 28-9, 33

Brothers, see Mahatmas

Brown, Gerry, 88, 91, 94-7, 103, 106, 128, 193

Brown, William T., 206-9, 226

Browning, Robert, 220

Bruzzesi, Signor, 100-1

Buddhism, 9, 115, 157-8, 185, 236, 263, 294, 299, 323

Buddhist monastery, 29-30

Bundy, Colonel John C., 238

Burr, William H., 121

C.I.D., 143

Cabala, see Kabbalists

Caithness, Countess Marie, Duchesse de Pomar, 214-17, 219, 223, 284

Candler, Mrs Ida, 307

Carmichael, Mr. and Mrs. David, 204-5

# INDEX

- Chevalier Louis, 103, 111  
 Childs, George W., 76  
 Chittenden, Vermont, 3, 62, 71, 82  
 Christian College Magazine, 242, 331-2  
 Christian Science, 8  
 Christianity, 9, 115, 142-3, 157, 219, 274, 294, 299, 313  
 Christophe, or Christofolo, 230-2  
 Clark, Dr. Robert A., 191  
 Cleather, Alice, 289  
 Coleman, William Emmette, 112, 294-5, 337-8  
 Collins, Mabel, 288-90; *Light on the Path*, 289, 300  
 Collins, Wilkie, 287  
 Constant, Abbé (Eliphas Lévi), 229, 294, 314  
 Conway, Moncure, 211-12  
 Cook, Florence, 77  
 Cooper-Oakley, Mr. and Mrs., 235-6, 249, 255  
 Corson, Eugene Rollin (son of Prof Hiram), 105  
 Corson, Prof. Hiram and wife, Caroline, 104-6, 144  
 Coues, Dr. Elliott, 229, 299-303; *Key to North American Birds*, 299  
 Coulomb, M. and Mme, 52-3, 154-6, 159, 172, 198, 201-2, 205, 213-14, 222-5, 230-4, 238, 240-60, 264, 301, H P B's letter from Paris, 223, 328-30, instructions for phenomena, 232, 331-2  
 Crawford, F. Marion, 10  
 cremation, 119-20  
 Crookes, Sir William, 11, 77, 220, 238  
 Cruvelli, Sophie, 42  
 cults, 6, 8, 9, 10, 64, 82, 111, 179, 190, 248, 266, 305  
 Cutting, Emma, see Coulomb, Mme  
 Damodar K. Mavalankar, 141, 143, 158-9, 162, 165, 185, 202, 206-9, 213-14, 223-5, 230-1, 240, 242-3, 246, 251-2, 255, 273, 325, 329; K. H.'s letter to, 224, 330-1; disappearance, 253  
 Darwin, Charles, 237  
 Dashkov, Catherine Romanovna, memoirs, 32  
 Davis, Andrew Jackson, 64-6  
 Dayanand, Swami Saraswati, 125, 130, 132, 134, 136-9, 142, 145-6, 176; repudiates H.P.B., 185-6, 327  
 Dharbagiri Nath, see Babaji D. Nath  
 Ditson, Dr. G. L., 121  
 Djual Khul, 164, 189, 250  
 Dolgoruki, Princess Helene, see Fadeev, Mme  
 Doubleday, General Abner W., 128, 299  
 Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, 131  
 Drexel, A J, 76  
 Duff, Sir Mountstuart Grant, 204  
 Dundukov-Korsakov, Prince, 41  
 Dweller, The, 86, 87, 92, 148  
 Dzyan, Book of, 291, 294, 309, 338  
 E. S. (Esoteric Section), 85, 297-8, 300, 310  
 Eddy, Mary Baker, 8, 98  
 Eddy brothers, 3, 5, 27, 48, 62-3, 65, 68, 71-2, 82, 301  
 Edison, Thomas A., 11, 237  
 Eglinton, Ernest and Joey, 183  
 Eglinton, William, 183-5, 190, 235, 240  
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 156  
 Eugénie, Empress, 59  
 Fadeev, Andrez Mikhailovich (H.P.B.'s grandfather), 15, 20, 23, 25, 37-40, 42, 50, 70

# INDEX

- Fadeev, Mme Helene (Princess Dolgoruki, H.P.B's grandmother), 15, 21  
 Fadeev, Mme N. A. (H.P.B's aunt), 14, 43, 47, 49-50, 127, 217, 235; letter of 1870 from Masters, 275; 282, 311  
 Fawcett, E. D., 291  
 Felt, J. H., 101, 117  
 Fern, Edmund W., 172-3, 180, 226, 240, 327  
 Field, Cyrus, 237  
 Flynn, Mary, 256, 258, 262-4  
 Foulke, Henry B., 284  
 Freemasons, 86, 100, 124  
 Furness, Horace H., 295  
 Furness, Rev. William H., 80  
  
 Gaboriau, Frederick, 259, 281  
 Gaitsin, Prince Alexander, 23-4  
 Garibaldi, 48  
 Gebhard, Franz, 228-9, 268, 271, 276, 282-3, 285, 300; Frau Gebhard, 229, 267, 285  
 Gladstone, William Ewart, 11, 235, 238  
 Gordon, Major General William and Mrs., 183-4  
 Greeley, Horace, 114  
 Guinan, Texas, 213  
  
 Hadji Morya, 164  
 Hahn, Leonid (H.P.B's brother), 40, 54  
 Hahn, Nicholas (H.P.B's cousin), 54  
 Hahn, Colonel Peter (H.P.B's father), 5, 15, 17, 19-20, 25, 27, 31-3, 47, 60, 72, 275  
 Hahn, Mme (Zenaida R., H.P.B's mother), 15, 17-18, 19-20, 313  
 Hare, H. E. and W. L., 165  
 Harisinghi Rupsinghji, Prince, 141, 214, 272-3  
 Harte, Richard, 291  
 Hartmann, Dr. Franz, 213-14, 222, 225, 242-4, 251-2, 254-8, 282; Hartmann, Dr. Franz (Continued) sisters, Countess von Spreti and Frau Max, 229  
 hashish, 36, 60  
 Hastings, Beatrice, 13, 14  
 Henderson, Major, 149-51, 323  
 Hindus and Hinduism, 9, 124-5, 136-8, 141-3, 156-7, 195, 200, 273  
 Hodgson, Richard, of the S.P.R., 236-55, 278, 284, 305  
 Hoffman, Maude, 42  
 Holkar, Maharajah of, 332  
 Holloway, Laura, 226-9, 233, 235, 259, 261  
 Holmes, Mr. and Mrs. Nelson, 75-9, 321  
 Holt, Elizabeth G. J., 59-60  
 Home, D. D., 31, 38, 47, 72, 81, 114-15, 122-3, 130, 217, 279, 335-6; Julie (wife), 123  
 Home for Working Women, 58, 60  
 Hormuji Servai, 151  
 Houghton, Mrs. Charles, 98  
 Howard, General D. O., 229  
 Hubbe-Schleiden, Dr., 229-30, 238, 276, 282, 299  
 Huc, Abbé, 29  
 Hume, Allen O., 150, 152-3, 161-2, 164, 167-82, 192, 205, 241, 246, 253-5, 300, 327, Mrs. Hume, 150-1  
 Hume, Joseph (father of Allen O.), 150  
 Hurrychund Chintamon, 132, 134-6, 139-40, 186-8  
  
 I. G., see E S  
 Ilarion, Mahatma, 43, 158, 164  
 Ilbert bill, 194  
 insanity, 191, 318  
 Isabella, Queen, 336  
 Isidore, Metropolitan of Kiev, 33  
  
 James, William, 238-9  
 Janet, Pierre, *The Mental State of Hystericals*, 104

# INDEX

- Jelhovskiy, Mme Vera, 21, 31-3, 39, 45, 47, 126, 133, 217, 229, 235, 275, 278, 280, 282, 288, 296, 313; flirtation with Solovyoff, 277; repudiates memoirs of H.P.B., 14, 318-19
- Jerebko, Clementine, 61-2, 94
- Johnson, Dr. Samuel, 89
- Judge, William Quan, 100, 110, 217, 243-4, 254, 280-1, 284, 300-3
- Jung, C. G., 191
- K., Mr., 27-9, 33, 43
- K H, see Koot Hoomi
- Kabbalists, 8, 86, 91, 100, 101, 123, 229, 292, 294
- Kandalawala, Judge N., 332
- Kant, Immanuel, 181
- Karma, 9, 82, 197, 207
- Keightley, Bertram and Dr. Archibald, 217, 285-93, 296, 300, 308, 315
- Keyserling, Count, 89
- Kiddle, Henry, 188-90, 204, 247, 301
- Kim, 145
- King, John, 77-80, 84-5, 87-9, 91-2, 95-6, 163, 321
- Kings, Katie, 77-8, 88, 321
- Kingsford, Rev Algernon, 218
- Kingsford, Anna, 218-19, 228, 238
- Kipling, John L. (father of Rudyard), 148
- Kishngbury, Miss, 282-3
- Kissalev, Countess, 35-6
- Koot Hoomi Lal Singh, Mahatma, 153, 163-72, 178-84, 187-99, 205, 207-8, 220, 224, 226-8, 231-2, 234, 241, 292, 298, 300, 311, 314, 324-8, 330-2, 336
- Kropotkin, Prince, 17
- L, Miss, 270, 276, 283, 332-3
- Lamasery, 106-8, 119, 124, 127-9, 137, 300
- Lane-Fox, Saint George, 214, 222, 225, 238, 251-2, 328, 330
- Leadbeater, C W., 12, 235-6, 251
- Lebendorf, Frau, 241
- Lesseps, Ferdinand de, 53
- Light, 186, 188, 190
- Lillie, Arthur, 241
- Lippitt, General Francis J., 76, 78-81, 88-92, 95-7, 128
- Lodge, Sir Oliver, 131, 238
- London Times, 152-3, 196, 233, 336
- Louse, the maid, 267-8, 282, 285
- Lucifer, H.P.B.'s London magazine, 290, 309-10
- Luther, 125
- Lytton, Bulwer, 86, 148, Zanoni, 86, 148
- Lytton, Lord, 148
- M., see Morya
- Madras Missionary College, 248
- Maeterlinck, Maunce, 88
- magic, 7, 10, 16-17, 20, 22, 26, 29-30, 35, 40, 60, 67, 79, 92, 114, 116-17, 125, 129-30, 132, 137, 146, 149-51, 175-6, 198, 202, 210, 269, 274, 329, Simla phenomena, 149-51; universal belief in, 176, rope trick, 57-8, 118, 176, duplicating rings, 183, 205, 232, 245; shrine, 202; vases, 203; pin trays, 205, 232-3, 245, 331-2; glamour, 212
- Magnon, Mme, 61
- Maha Chohan, 161, 164, 193, 197, 324
- Mahatmas, also known as Masters or Brothers: first encounter, 27; H.P.B. their agent since girlhood, 26, 89, 275; advantages of, 85-6, Swami Dayanand a Mahatma, 146; description of principals, 163-4; sponsor Phoenix venture, 192-7; meet H.P.B. in Darjeeling, 198-200; appear to Olcott

# INDEX

## Mahatmas (Continued)

and party, 207-9; H.P.B.'s control of, threatened, 227; investigated by S.P.R., 238-48; visit Adyar, 250; H.P.B. admits and denies inventing them, 279, 336, her final effort to authenticate, 313-14; and *passim*.

Mahatma letters: publication of, 42; alleged first letter, 49-50; probable first, 84; red- and blue-penciled postscripts and memos, 88, 91, 128, 234, 241, 269; description of, 162-3; authenticity, 138, 164-6, 174, 224, 240-1; exposition of theosophical theory, 167; letters to Hume classics, 179, high point of output, 183; *en cas*, 233; Coulombs demonstrate precipitation of, 245; quotations from, 324-8; also, 140, 179, 197, 203-4, 230, 247, 295

Maitland, Edward, 218-19, 238

Marquette, Lydia, 54

Marvin, Dr. F. R., 72

Mary Magdalene, St., 218

Mary Queen of Scots, 214-15

Massey, C. C., 131-2, 134, 186-8, 190, 192, 217, 238, 246-7, 266, 324

Masters, see Mahatmas

Mazzini, 100

Mead, G. R. S., 309-10

Mentana, battle of, 48-9, 87

Messalina, 270, 332-3

Metamon, Paulos, 35

Metrovitch, Agardi, 37-8, 40-52, 101, 107, 223, 275-6, 301

Metrovitch, Teresina, 42

Meyendorf, Baron Nicholas, 44, 46-7, 72-3, 122, 217, 275, 279, 301-2, 335-6

Meyendorf, Baroness, 47

Michalko Guegidse, 5, 68-70, 82

Milan, King of Serbia, 38

Miracle Club, 79, 83, 85, 87, 101-2

miracles, see magic

Mr. Isaacs, 10

Mitchell, Mrs. Isabella Olcott (Olcott's sister), 126

Mitford, see Mirza Murad Ali Beg

Mirza Murad Ali Beg, 191; *Elixir of Life*, 191

Mohini Chatterji, 213, 215, 217, 220, 227, 235, 246, 270-3, 281, 332-3, 337

Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley, 98

Montaigne, 314

Moolji Thackersey, 124-5, 130, 134, 137

Morgan, Major General H. R. and Mrs., 189-90, 204-5, 232-3, 242, 245, 249, 255

Morgan, Sir Henry, 77

Morsier, Mme Emile de, 262-3, 281

Morya, Mahatma, 90, 138, 140, 142, 163-4, 167, 170-2, 178-81, 199, 234, 250-2, 275, 314, 321, 324-8

Moses, Stainton, 131

Muller, Max, 295-6

Myers, F. W. H., 220, 229

mysticism, 7, 8, 10, 113, 177, 195, 215, 218, 229, 264, 274, 310

Netherclift, handwriting expert, 241

New York Evening Post, 109

New York Graphic, 4, 63, 65, 67-8, 71-3, 82, 160, 301

New York Herald, 116, 129

New York Star, 60

New York Sun, 57, 67-8, 83, 96, 116, 164, 301-3

New York Times, 116, 129

New York Tribune, 63, 116

New York World, 119

Nineteenth Century, 11

occultism, 7, 8, 10, 23, 26, 36, 41, 43, 58, 102-3, 112-14, 118, 123-5, 130, 132, 135, 140, 145, 148, 150, 156, 170, 174-9, 180, 185-6, 191, 193-4, 198, 210-12, 218, 225, 229, 261, 271-2, 287,

# INDEX

## occultism (*Continued*)

- 291-2, 305, 312, 321, 326, 335  
O'Connor, J. E., 184-5  
Olcott, Colonel Henry Steel meets H.P.B., 3-5, 62-3; background and personality, 63-4; receives Betanelly letters, 67-70; investigates the Holmeses in Philadelphia, 76; becomes Neophyte in Egyptian Brotherhood, 84-7; Boston and Gerry Brown, 96-9, helps found Theosophical Society in New York, 101; shares apartment with H P B. and assists with Isis, 106-8, 111-12; organizes de Palm cremation, 119-20; begins correspondence with India, 124-5; receives message from Master M., 138; disillusionment, 139, 141, 156, 159; business manager of *The Theosophist*, 141-2, assists H.P.B. with Russian spy charges, 148-9; organizes Ceylon tours, 157-8, introduced to Shrine, 202-3; healing activities prohibited, 206; sees and speaks to Master on tour, 206-9, Hodgson's estimate of, 248, talks to Master, 250; contemplates suicide, 256; helps H P B. escape from India, 249-57, ignored by H P B., 260-1, 296-7; tries to prevent organization of E S., 298-9  
Olcott, Mrs Mary Morgan (wife of Col. Henry Steel), 63, 93, 99, 106, 128, 131  
Olcott, Morgan (son of Col Henry Steel), 78  
Oppenheimer, Dr Leon, 276  
Orlov-Davidov, the Counts, 40  
O'Sullivan, Hon. John L., 114  
Owen, Robert Dale, 75-7  
Palladino, Eusapia, 77  
Palm, Baron de, 119-21, 127-8, 301, 314  
Pancoast, Dr. Seth, 91, 101, 112  
Paracelsus, 8, 170, 294  
paranoia, 8, 191, 200  
Parker, Miss, 59  
Patterson, Rev. George, 242  
Peebles, James M., 124-5  
*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 77-8  
*Philadelphia Ledger*, 76  
Philalethes, Eugenius, 294  
*Phoenix, The*, 192-7, 202, 204, 220, 228  
Podmore, Frank, 220  
Presbyterian Marathi Mission, 143  
Prince, Morton, 45  
Prince, Walter Franklin, 239  
Pryse, James M., 310  
Pusey, Joshua, 81  
Ragoonath Rao, 331  
Ramalinga Deb, 332  
Ramaswamier, S., 199, *How a Chela Found his Guru*, 199  
Randolph, Pascal Beverly, 114  
Rasputin, 17  
Rawson, Albert Leighton, 34-7, 107, 110  
reincarnation, 9, 186, 210, 218-19  
*Religio-Philosophical Journal*, 78, 238  
Rinaldo, Mr., 58  
Rockhill, William W., 30  
Rolland, Romain, 88  
Roosevelt, President Theodore, 37, 51  
Root, Elihu, 302  
Rosicrucians, 86, 100, 114, 124, 190, 209, 213, 292, 321  
Ruskin, John, 238  
Russell, George (A. E.), 293  
Sargent, Epes, 97-8, 295  
Sassoon, Jacob, 332  
Savonarola, 185  
Schleiden, Dr. Hübbe, see Hübbe-Schleiden  
Schmiechen, Hermann, 226

# INDEX

- Science and Health*, 8  
 Sebiro, Mme, 53-4  
 Senkovsky (Baron Brambens), 18  
 Serapis Bey, 85-7, 92-3, 96-9,  
     106-7, 109, 128, 140, 160  
 Shankaracharya, 175  
 Shaw, Bernard, 303  
 Shrine, 203, 205, 210, 213, 217,  
     223, 232, 242-4, 249, 254, de-  
     scription, 202  
 Sidgwick, Prof. Henry, President  
     S P R., 278  
 Sims, Mr., of British Museum, 241  
 Sinnett, A. P. entertains H.P.B.,  
     Allahabad and Simla, 144-53;  
     intercedes with F O on Russian  
     spy charges, 148-9, Simla picnic,  
     149-50; Mrs. Hume's brooch,  
     150-1; proposes London Times  
     test, 152-3; astral postoffice and  
     Mahatma letters, 41, 152-3,  
     161-2, 164-7, 179, 183, 324-8;  
     with H P B. to Hume's Simla  
     castle, 167-73; tested by H P B.  
     for blind obedience, 174-82, 246;  
     Eglinton fiasco, 184-5; letter from  
     Kiddle, 188-9; Phoenix venture,  
     192-7, 204; aspires to presidency  
     of London Lodge, 219-20; Laura  
     Holloway brings disillusionment,  
     226-8, H P B. continues to de-  
     pend on his help, 233, 280-1,  
     332-3; Gabonau incident, 259-  
     60; discarded by H P B., 296-7;  
     opposes E S., 298; estranged at  
     H P B.'s death, 315  
     writings: *Occult World*, 165-6,  
     188-90, 213, 217, 226, 304; *Eso-  
     teric Buddhism*, 217; *Incidents in  
     the Life of Mme Blavatsky*,  
     274-8; H P B.'s letters about Met-  
     rovitch, 41-5, 47-9, 55, 319-20;  
     repudiated by Vera, 14  
 Sinnett, Mrs. Patience, 67, 281,  
     332-3  
 Ski, 131, 133, 187-8, 217, 247, 266  
 Smirnov, Rev. E., 313  
 Smith, Miss Sue, 58-9  
 Société Spirite, 52-4, 202  
 Society for Psychical Research, 217,  
     234, 236, 274, 278, 284, 287,  
     298, 305-6, 323, 330-1; verdict  
     on H P B., 10, 248; Report,  
     237-57; types of witnesses, 246;  
     conclusions, 247  
 Society of Friends of Mme Blavat-  
     sky, 13-14  
 Solovyov, V. S., 217, 229, 234, 259,  
     281, entertains H P B. at Saint-  
     Cergues, 262-4; refuses to col-  
     laborate with H P B., 276-7;  
     H P B.'s confession, 278-80,  
     334-7, *Modern Priestess of Isis*,  
     278  
 Sotheran, Charles, 100-2, 107-8,  
     112, 128  
 Spaulding, E S., 118  
 Spedalieri, Baron, 229  
 Spencer, Herbert, 237  
*Spiritual Scientist*, 86, 91, 94, 123  
 spiritualism, 4, 5, 7, 9, 31-3, 39-40,  
     52-5, 62-106 *passim*, 115, 117,  
     119, 124, 131, 190, 204, 224,  
     226, 237, 303, 321, 336  
 Spreiti, Countess von, 229  
*Springfield Republican*, 116  
 Stead, William T., 304  
 Sterne, Laurence, 78  
 Stewart, A T., 121  
 Subba Row, T. H P B. consults on  
     secrets of occultism, 174-9, 261,  
     buys Adyar estate for H P B., 176,  
     198, 201; advises H P B. to buy  
     Coulomb letters, 225, 230, re-  
     action to H P B., 246, name on  
     first title page of *Secret Doctrine*,  
     284, refuses to edit, 285  
 Subramania Iyer, Sir S., 249  
 Swedenborg, Emanuel, 8-9  
 telepathy, 9, 115  
 Tennyson, Alfred, Lord, 11, 238

# INDEX

- Thayer, Mary Baker, 96, 98-9
- Theosophical Society: statistics of growth, 12; conflicting policies, 12-14; founding of, 8, 27, 101-4, 275, 318-19; probable origin, 83-6; selection of name, 101-2; amalgamation with Arya Samaj, 126, struggles and demise of original American Society, 106, 117-19, 124, 128; London T.S., 131-2, 218; T.S. in India, 136, 138, 140, 143, 148, 155, 168, 206; adoption of Universal Brotherhood plank endorsed by Maha Chohan, 159-61; scanty membership, 194, 209; investigation by S.P.R., 239-40, 328, ninth convention, 249-50; proposed reorganization, 251-2; actual reorganization, 255; resignations after S.P.R. Report, 281, 284; H.P.B. organizes Blavatsky Lodge and E. S. independent of Adyar, 296-7, 309; Olcott compromises, 299, revival of American society, 299-303; H.P.B.'s concern, 288, 303, London headquarters, 308
- Theosophist*, 141-2, 155-6, 158, 164, 168, 175, 191, 207-9, 213, 259, 262, 285, 290, 298
- Theosophy, 23, 26, 30, 41, 57, 64, 89, 123, 131, 141, 148, 151-4, 158, 161, 166-70, 209, 215-16, 219-20, 223, 262, 282, 295-6, 304, 308, 323; past history of, 8; H.P.B.'s adaptation, 9-12; Lost Formula, 175; warning by psychiatrists, 191; S.P.R. statement of H.P.B.'s claims, 239
- Theresa, St., 247
- Thomas, St., 244
- Tibet, 9, 48-9, 57-8, 130, 142, 156-8, 162-3, 170, 177, 181, 199-200, 207-8, 234, 239, 247, 253, 269, 275, 285, 324, 326;
- Tibet (*Continued*)
- H.P.B.'s efforts to establish residence, 26, 28-30
- Times of India*, 323
- Tuitit Bey, 84, 86, 97, 160, 163
- Tussaud, Mme, Wax Works, 133
- Vanderbilt, Commodore, 121
- Vega, 184, 235
- Voltaire, 241
- Vorontzov-Dashkov, Count, 40
- Wachtmeister, Countess Constance, 27, 229, 264-76, 280-8, 315; *Reminiscences of H.P. Blavatsky*, 266
- Wadhwan, Thakur Sahib of, 214
- Wallace, Alfred Russel, 11, 77, 238
- Webster, F. E., 204, 241
- Westbrook, Richard B., 78
- Weygandt, 191
- Wiggin, Rev. J. H., 98, 101
- Wilder, Dr. Alexander, 108-12, 121, 128, 284, 314, 318
- Wilkes-Barre Times*, 284
- Wilson, Henry, 76
- Wimbridge, E., 127, 133, 135, 140, 148, 155, 328
- Witte, Count S. Y. (H.P.B.'s cousin), 21, 23, 36-43, 46, 50-2
- Witte, Mme (H.P.B.'s aunt), 37, 50, 68
- Wittgenstein, Prince Émile de, 73, 114, 301-2
- Wolff, Mrs. Hannah Shepard, 60
- women, comments on by Mahatmas, 325
- Wong Chin Foo, 121, 322
- Wyoming rabbits, 114
- Yeats, William Butler, 89
- Yoga and yogis, 7, 9, 130, 137-8, 145, 176-7, 185, 198-9, 271, 327; Subba Row on yogis, 177-8
- Youry (illegitimate child), 41, 44-8, 51, 66, 275, 279, 334
- Yusuf ben Makerzi, Shaik, 35





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